Title: Breaking from Tradition: Women’s Labor Force Participation and Investments in Females in Rural Gujarat, 1981-2011

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Abstract: Does the relationship between women’s employment and subsequent investments in females vary with the cultural legitimacy of women’s work? We address this question by differentiating between women’s engagement in traditional labor—paid work that allows women to maintain their traditional roles at home—and nontraditional labor—paid work that takes women away from their tasks at home. Studying women’s employment across three decades and 17,000 rural villages in Gujarat, India, we consider links between each type of FLFP and future investments in females. We analyze associations between village-level changes in women’s rates of employment in traditional and non-traditional work and subsequent investments in females within the village, specifically the female sex ratio (females under six as ratio of all children under six) and female literacy rates. Increases in FLFP in traditional work are associated with greater equality in the sex ratio; increases in FLFP in nontraditional work are associated with higher female literacy rates. The gendered power balance within communities also shapes investments in females. Female sex ratio and literacy rates fall after increases in male labor force participation. Male employment also moderates returns to women’s employment: increases in male labor force participation within a village magnify returns to women’s employment in traditional roles and minimize or reverse returns to women’s employment in nontraditional roles. Our findings suggest that shifts toward greater equality within communities and organizations may be most likely when non-legitimized behavior carried out by low power parties intersects with falling influence by higher power parties, when higher power parties’ ability to stifle change is most constrained. We conclude that changes in the nature of women’s work, rather than rising rates of employment overall, shape future investments in females. Our findings help explain why some communities and organizations move toward greater equality while others sit still, even as more women are employed. Critically, our findings suggest that empowering women without considering men’s power to influence responses to that empowerment risks greater gender inequalities over time.