

From Pink-Collar to Lab Coat: Cultural Persistence and Diffusion of Socialist Gender Norms

Abstract

This paper documents the vertical transmission and societal diffusion of gender norms with respect to educational and occupational preferences, through the encounter of two different gender cultures, Western and Soviet, triggered by the 1990's mass migration from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) to Israel. We track the educational choices of an entire cohort, comparing gender gaps among FSU immigrants, arriving in Israel as young children, versus natives and immigrants from other countries. We find evidence of the persistence of Soviet gender norms among FSU immigrants: in traditionally male-dominated STEM fields and female-dominated "pink collar" jobs, e.g. education and social work, gender gaps are smallest among FSU immigrants. These patterns are largely driven by the behavior of women from the FSU and not explained by differences in early achievement or comparative advantage in mathematical skills. With respect to societal diffusion we find that among Natives, the gender gap in field choice narrows with the concentration of FSU immigrants in middle school, reflecting a shift in the choice patterns of native women towards STEM and away from pink collar fields.