



Aukje Nieuwenhuis

Bridging the gap in the labor market: studying (and challenging) gender stereotypes

Aukje Nieuwenhuis recently received the Jan Brouwer Thesis Award from the Royal Holland Society for Sciences and Humanities (Koninklijke Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen, KHMW) for her master's thesis. Her thesis, titled *Gender-stereotypical labor market behavior across generations: evidence from conditional second moments*, is in applied econometrics and labor economics. After obtaining her master's degree at the Faculty of Economics and Business last year, she continues her line of research as a PhD candidate at the faculty. FEB Research talked to Nieuwenhuis about her research and the importance of creating equal employment opportunities for everyone.

Aukje Nieuwenhuis' award-winning master's thesis considers the gender gap in the labor market: globally, women still tend to earn less, work fewer hours, and are underrepresented in leadership positions when compared to men. That gap turns out to be stubbornly persistent, despite decades of emancipation and policy attempts to try to close it. Thus, it is a highly relevant topic for continued research, examining the mechanisms that perpetuate gender inequality in the labor market.

After writing her bachelor's thesis on female part-time employment, Nieuwenhuis revisited the topic of employment gender gaps during the research projects of the research master. "Gender inequality in the labor market remains a hot topic in many social sciences and the presence of deeply embedded social norms that interact with individual preferences add to the complexity. I am very passionate about this topic. I care about female emancipation, and about creating equal employment opportunities for everyone."

Sticky gender norms

So called ‘sticky gender norms’ are agreed to be one possible cause for the persistent gender gap. These are beliefs and expectations about what are supposedly ‘suitable’ jobs for women and for men. These beliefs are passed on from one generation to the next, by stereotypical example, as well as more subliminally. Nieuwenhuis: “In my thesis, I look at gender-stereotypical attitudes of parents (as derived from their job choices) and how those affect the employment choices of their children. I pose the following question: If a parent displays employment behavior that is typical for their gender, is their child then more or less likely to make career choices in line with stereotypes for their gender?”

Nieuwenhuis’ thesis argues that two mechanisms are involved: causality and selection. Causality means that holding a gender-stereotypical occupation affects children’s careers through parenting choices. Selection, on the other hand, implies that parents and children have similar gender role attitudes, regardless of parenting and parents’ labor market choices. “I find strong results for daughters, but not so clear results for sons. The biggest finding of my thesis is an adverse causality. While this must sound a little dry and technical, this finding is in fact very relevant: daughters of parents who hold more gender-stereotypical occupations say that they would like to have a non-stereotypical career. It means that the fact that women nevertheless end up more in stereotypically



‘female’ jobs is entirely driven by selection. So even if parents have atypical jobs, when their overall thinking and expression around their children is gender-stereotypical, their daughters end up in typical jobs more often. In short: it is gender norms, not jobs, that perpetuate gender gaps in the labor market.”

Important outcomes for policymakers

The outcomes of Nieuwenhuis’ master’s thesis are relevant for policymakers, as policies aimed at balanced occupational gender compositions may not induce the desired spillovers if gender norms remain unchanged. She explains: “The important policy advice is to work towards changing the norms that parents hold, and not so much the jobs they hold. Existing policies have aimed to get women into atypical jobs. But that does not seem to bring on the radical social change needed for gender equality in the labor market. The persistent gender gap puzzle is a socially highly relevant topic, and my results highlight the need for policies that affect gender norms if we want to ensure intergenerational spillovers.”

The PhD candidate realizes that this poses a considerable challenge for policymakers, since changing social norms is difficult. “Effective interventions would have to counteract the gender attitudes provided in the household. Examples are information campaigns that promote new role models and encourage atypical choices.”

The Jan Brouwer Thesis Award

Each year the Royal Holland Society for Sciences and Humanities (Koninklijke Hollandische Maatschappij der Wetenschappen, KHMW) awards the best Master’s Theses in eight categories of Humanities and Social Sciences. Aukje Nieuwenhuis won the award in the category ‘Economics’. Last year, she graduated from the Research Master in Economics and Business. Her master’s thesis was supervised by associate professor Agnieszka Postepska and professor Rob Alessie, who are now also her PhD supervisors.



Gender gaps in working hours

Winning the Jan Brouwer Thesis Award was a great motivational boost for Nieuwenhuis, she is excited to continue working on the topic in the coming years during her PhD. Her current PhD research expands on the topic of her master's thesis, with an alternative estimation technique to check the sensitivity of her results and with data from a different country. "Strikingly, the findings for daughters align with the conclusion drawn in my master's thesis, further supporting the notion that selection drives the positive correlation observed in gender-stereotypical behavior of parents and daughters."

While Nieuwenhuis' master's thesis focused on gender-stereotypical behavior manifested in occupations, gender stereotypes can also become evident in other areas of employment and lifestyle choices, such as the division of paid labor and housework, as well as working hours. "My second PhD project focuses on gender gaps in working hours, specifically in the Netherlands. Here, the roots of the gender income gap appear to lie in part-time employment. The fact that Dutch women are part-time "champions" among all OECD countries makes the Netherlands an interesting population to study female labor force participation. Female part-time employment is a subject that often elicits strong opinions from many people, and public debates surrounding it can be emotional at times. What I like about studying female employment at this faculty, is that I learn the facts and can enter the discussion from a more objective point of view."