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The STEM Gender-Equality Paradox: Further Evidence from a Within-Country Analysis

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“The STEM gender-equality paradox refers to girls’ and women’s higher rates of participation in, and more favorable attitudes towards, some Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics fields of study in less economically developed societies. Efforts to explain the strong gender segregation of some STEM fields in affluent democracies have been complicated by difficulties involved in comparing countries and educational systems that vary on several dimensions simultaneously. Within-country comparison of school sectors is one way to mitigate this challenge and assess the generalizability of observed differences in the STEM gender gap between more and less affluent contexts. In this study we exploit the unique characteristics of the Israeli education system by comparing two schooling sectors under the state education system in Israel, one that serves the socioeconomically marginal Palestinian-Arab minority and the other that serves the more affluent Jewish secular majority in Israel. Previous studies that focused on the Israeli case have shown that Palestinian-Arab girls are more inclined than Jewish girls to choose advanced high school physics and computer science. In this study, we focus on STEM-related attitudes in year 9 of middle school, when students choose their high school advanced subjects. We explore two related research questions. The first is whether Jewish and Palestinian-Arab girls differ in their attitudes towards math after controlling for socio-economic background, previous achievement in mathematics and English, and general attitudes towards schooling. We also include school fixed effects, which adjust for differences in average achievement levels and other school-level characteristics. The second research question is whether Jewish and Palestinian-Arab girls exhibit different levels of STEM-aversion after controlling the same factors plus their attitudes towards math. In line with previous studies, we find that girls from the less affluent and less individualistic Palestinian-Arab society exhibit more favorable attitudes towards math and less STEM-aversion. We show, furthermore, that the boy-advantaging gender gap in Hebrew-speaking schools is specific to STEM-related fields of study and does not hold for general attitudes towards schooling.”

Yariv Feniger is an associate professor in the Department of Education at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and is a fellow in the Education Policy Program at the Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel. His areas of interest include social and educational inequality, education policy and comparative education. His current research focuses on social inequality in Israeli higher education and influences of national and international standardized test on students, teachers and education policy. He teaches courses on the Israeli education system, educational inequality and education policy.

