

People who cannot escape a system are likely to defend the status quo

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The freedom of emigration at will is internationally recognized as a human right. But, in practice, emigration is often restricted, whether by policy or by poverty. A new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, finds that people who are told that their right to emigrate will be restricted have what could be considered a strange reaction: they respond by defending their country's system.

The researchers suspected that people who are under an oppressive regime might try to see their situation in the best light possible. "When you're stuck with something, one tendency is to make peace with it and try to see it in as much of a positive light as you can," says Kristin Laurin, who cowrote the study with Steven Shepherd and Aaron C. Kay at the University of Waterloo. But it was also possible to have the opposite reaction: "Other times, when you're told that you can't have something, that makes you want it more."

In one experiment for the study, 28 Canadian women read a paragraph about freedom of emigration from Canada. Half read a paragraph saying that moving out of Canada would become easier in the next few years, and the other half read a paragraph saying that this would become more difficult. Then the women read another paragraph that described gender inequality in Canada—for example, that "men's starting salaries are a full 20% higher than women's starting salaries." The women who read that emigration would become harder were less likely to attribute that gender inequality to a systemic problem with their country. The

researchers interpret that to mean that people who feel trapped in their country are more likely to try to justify the country's system and rationalize away its dissatisfactory elements.

"We focused on policies, but there are a lot of other reasons that make it hard for people to leave. One of these is [poverty](#)," says Laurin. "It's a depressing thought that the poor, the very [people](#) who are put in the worst position by a particular system, might be the ones that are the most motivated to defend that system."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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