

Female Economic Empowerment and Domestic Violence

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THIS REPORT INVESTIGATES the relationship between female economic empowerment and domestic violence, using administrative data on women's potential earnings and hospital visits for injuries caused by assault. The results show that an increase in a woman's potential earnings increases the probability that she will be assaulted, and increases the probability that her husband will be admitted to a hospital for reasons related to mental health, substance abuse or assault. This relationship indicates that female economic independence can have an unforeseen backlash, even in a gender-equal country like Sweden.

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The report is based on the chapter »Backlash: Female Economic Empowerment and Domestic Violence« in Sanna Ericsson's doctoral thesis *Reaching for Equality: Essays on Education and Gender Economics*.

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Domestic violence is a serious problem for public health, productivity and gender equality. Globally, one in three women will experience violence from a partner at some point during her lifetime, and the global cost of intimate partner violence is estimated to be 5.2% of world GDP.¹ Female economic empowerment is often cited as one of the most effective ways to combat domestic violence, but the theoretical predictions diverge. Models of household bargaining predict that a wife's better economic position improves the outside option of the marriage, and, as a result, reduces violence.² In contrast, models of male backlash predict that an improved economic position of the wife may violate traditional gender norms and redefine the power relationship between the spouses, eliciting a violent response from the husband.³

In this report, I estimate the effect of increased female economic empowerment on domestic violence. I use detailed Swedish administrative data, and measure domestic violence in terms of hospital visits among women injured in an assault that occurred in the home. Using hospital data as a measure of violence against women implies that I can capture only women who have been severely injured. The measure, however, reduces the likelihood of reporting bias as these women seek treatment out of medical necessity, not out of choice.

To account for earnings endogeneity, I proxy female economic empowerment with a demand-driven measure of women's potential earnings. The measure of potential earnings exploits gender segregation in the labour market, regional industry composition and differential wage growth over time, and captures exogenous variation in female economic empowerment caused only by changes in the local demand for female labour.

I show that increasing a woman's potential earnings increases the probability that she will seek hospital treatment for injuries caused by assault. An increase of one standard deviation in potential earnings implies an 80 percent increase in the probability of assault, compared to the mean probability. Thus, my results are in line with the predictions of male backlash theory, as they show that a wife's improved economic position increases the risk that she will be assaulted. As further support, I show that increasing wives' potential earnings increase the probability that their husbands seek treatment for mental health issues or destructive behavior, such as substance abuse or himself having been assaulted.

Furthermore, I show that the effect

of increased potential earnings depends on the subgroup of the population. The positive relationship between potential earning and hospital treatment for assault is stronger for women with at least an upper secondary education. For women aged 20 to 40 the effect of increased potential earnings is negative, but after the age of 45 the effect is consistently positive. Speculatively, the difference in effects by age could depend on the credibility of the threat of leaving an abusive spouse. A young woman's threat of leaving may be more credible as it has yet to be tested. In line with this reasoning, I show that the backlash effect also increases with the duration of the marriage.

More research is needed on the causes and consequences of domestic violence. My results show a backlash to increased female economic empowerment even in a gender-equal country like Sweden. They also highlight the importance of not assuming that all demographic groups will be affected in the same way by an improved economic position. It is therefore important to work with the development of support functions for survivors of domestic violence, and to reach women who usually do not figure prominently in discussions of domestic violence (such as older or higher educated women). Other ways forward may be to direct anti-violence initiatives to men, to support people with mental illness, and to instill gender-equal attitudes in boys and girls – starting in early childhood.

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