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Intimate Partner Violence, Norms and Policies

Violence against women has been called by then UN Secretary-General and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kofi Annan, “perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. And, it is perhaps the most pervasive.” Although the spread of domestic violence is difficult to quantify precisely, this is uncontroversially an issue worthy of policy concern. As is often the case, the developing world lags behind. What can development cooperation do? A growing body of economic research, including our recent results, shows that improving women’s economic opportunities matters.



Introduction

It is not easy to put a figure on the prevalence of violence against women. A recent review (Alhabib et al., 2010) reports that “the prevalence of lifetime domestic violence varies from 1.9% in Washington, US, to 70% in Hispanic Latinas in Southeast US.” As the quote shows, most of the currently available studies were conducted in the US or Europe, although the focus on the developing world is rapidly growing. Besides the geographic bias, the nature of data available on the matter further limits the precision of our knowledge. Surveys (used by the vast majority of studies), crime statistics and administrative health data each suffer from different limitations. One detail, though, consistently emerges in the big picture: the largest share of violence against women is perpetrated by a cohabiting partner or other family members, what is commonly referred to as intimate partner violence or domestic violence.

In addition to the human costs, a growing body of research shows that domestic violence has huge economic costs, including the direct costs of health, legal, police and other services. There are also broader social costs, more difficult to quantify. Domestic violence is likely to reduce women's participation in productive employment and education, and has also been shown to affect the welfare and education of children.

Legislation and policy

While specific domestic violence laws were uncommon just a few decades ago, many countries have, over the past two decades, adopted or revised legislation. In 2008, the United Nations (UN) launched a dedicated initiative advocating for universal “adoption and enforcement of national laws to address and punish all forms of violence against women and girls, in line with international human rights standards.”

Even though issues of implementation and enforcement are more important than the letter of

these laws, it is still crucial that laws are there. In such an area where culture and social norms play a big role, legislation can function as a signal of what a society deems acceptable and coordinate behavior to ultimately change social norms. This is why for example the recent law change in Russia was strongly criticized, regardless of the alleged advantages of the new formulation in terms of practical implementation. [A/N: The reform decriminalized and reduced the punishment for attacks that result in “minor injuries”, as long as they do not happen more than once a year, from two years to 15 days in prison. Proponents claimed that declassifying this form of violence from criminal to administrative offence would lower the threshold for reporting, and avoid misapplication by the police for extortion purposes.]

Besides legislation, a broad range of policies in different areas play a role for the prevalence of domestic violence and the fight against it. The knowledge gaps in terms of prevalence hinder the investigation of the factors that amplify or dampen the incidence of domestic violence, and as a consequence make it more difficult to draw implications for policy strategies. Whatever improves the parity between genders and the status of women in a society is however likely to work in the right direction, at least in the long run. Among the policies with established effects in this direction are legal rights for women (for example in terms of political representation); the introduction of role models (for example through cable TV); an improved balance of economic resources within the household (see Jayachandran, 2015 for an overview of the literature).

Development policy

As for many other areas, developing countries tend to lag behind in this respect. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), domestic violence is considered a



barrier to sustainable development, with 36%-70% prevalence (Garcia et al., 2005) and an estimated cost of 1.2%-3.7% of GDP (Duvvury et al., 2013). These estimates take into account a broad range of consequences for women and children. Besides direct and indirect health and life expectancy consequences, distorted outcomes for women include lower autonomy, affecting economic and financial decisions, effectiveness of home production, freedom of movement, education and labor market participation and healthcare decisions. Children are affected by distorted reproductive decisions, for example in regard to birth spacing, resulting in lower birth weights and worse chances of survival, and rearing decisions in general. Still these costs can be thought of as a lower bound, given the conservatism of the methodology and the gross under-reporting of violence. Although the main responsibility for policy lies of course within the country, we might still wonder what the international community can do to help, within the framework of development cooperation.

Aid and domestic violence

Even though the donor community agreed, in Addis Abeba in 2015, on a “beyond aid” agenda to reach the 17 sustainable development goals (see UN, 2015), the main tool of development cooperation is currently still foreign aid. In recent research with Anders Olofsgård and Evelina Bonnier, we investigate the impact of aid on gender-related outcomes, and among them domestic violence. There are three reasons why we expect an impact of development aid on these outcomes. First of all, there may be a direct effect of aid-financed projects on the intended beneficiaries. Many aid projects have nowadays an explicit component targeting women and girls. Moreover, donors also agreed to gender “mainstreaming” (Beijing Platform for Action, 1995), which implies that gender concerns should be integrated into all policy and program cycles, and that governments should engage in a dialogue on gender and development. This is

because women and girls are seen as particularly vulnerable in situations of poverty and conflict, but also potentially instrumental in the general process of development (Duflo, 2012).

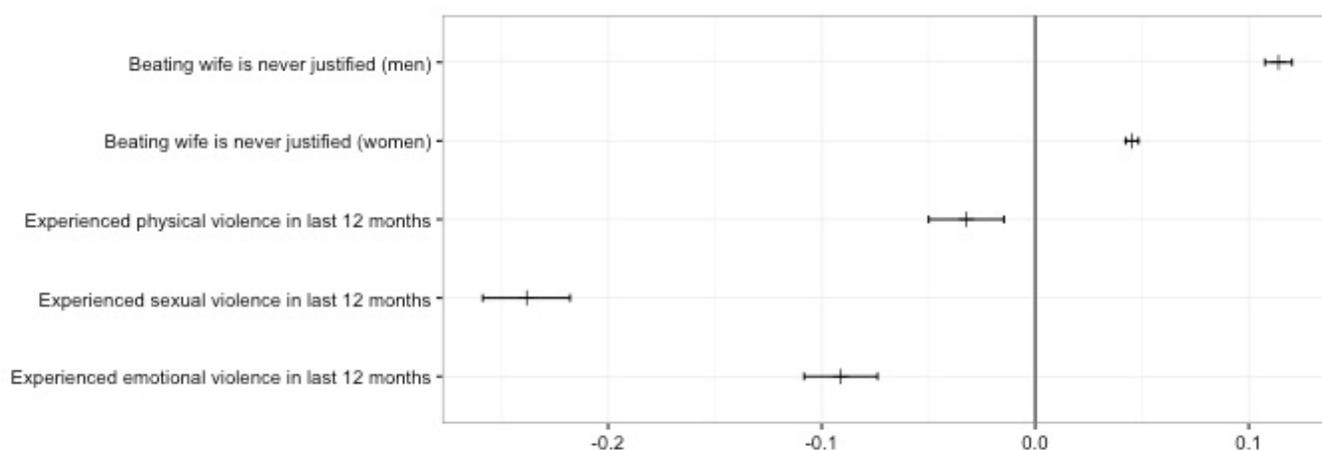
Second, aid projects are typically intended to benefit whole communities, and there are often positive externalities that extend beyond the immediately targeted beneficiaries and beyond the stated objectives of the project. Think for instance of immunization drives against infectious diseases (Miguel and Kremer, 2004). When a big enough group of school children are treated against, for example, intestinal worms, far larger communities are also protected due to the now lower probability of contagion, and also the indirect benefits extend to them. Projects targeting livelihoods and jobs can also increase aggregate demand in the community, benefiting those not directly involved in the projects. The ultimate level of spillover goes through economy-wide growth and development. Research shows that gender relations tend to become more equal with economic development and that women tend to gain more than men (Duflo, 2012).

Finally, beyond economic opportunities, positive spillovers can come through transmission of information and attitudes, changing social norms through personal networks, including both direct beneficiaries and others.

Figure 1 is based on our empirical investigation linking the most recent Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) in Uganda and Malawi to information on the geographical coordinates of aid projects placement, provided by AidData. Men in the areas exposed to aid (which we define to be within a 15 km radius of at least one aid-financed project) are 11% more likely to share the opinion that beating one’s wife is not justifiable, as compared to men not exposed to aid. This difference is even larger than for women (4%). Most importantly, women exposed to aid are less likely to have experienced some form of violence, physical (-3%), emotional (-9%) and in particular sexual (-24%). We think this might be connected to the improved status of the woman in economic terms.



Figure 1. Effect of aid on domestic violence



Source: Berlin et al., forthcoming

In fact, we find much more modest impacts from exposure to specifically gender-targeted projects (examples of which include “Community participation and development”, “Support for vulnerable groups”, “Improvement of outpatient, maternal and child health services”, “Women’s empowerment for peace”, and “Anti-trafficking for women and children”). We also find that aid presence affects labor market participation for women, but do not find this effect from gender-specific aid. This is consistent with the idea that women’s relative status within the household improves as a consequence of better economic opportunities, in this case induced by aid. Evidence supporting this mechanism is piling up, see Aizer (2010), Bobonis et al. (2013), Heath (2014), Anderberg et al. (2016), Hidrobo et al. (2016), to cite just a few. The types of activities

that fall under our definition of gender-specific aid, instead, do not seem to contribute in this respect.

Conclusion

Summarizing recent research, the World Development Report 2015 called for development policy to focus on norms and mental models. These are often highly persistent and hard to change. We know that gender-related norms are important for outcomes that deeply affect the lives of women and girls. We do not know a lot about how to change them, but improving the status of women and girls in society seems to be one important piece of the puzzle. Our recent findings about the impacts of aid imply, echoing the WDR 2015, that this should be an important goal for development cooperation.



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