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Economic Perspectives on Domestic Violence | Insights from the FROGEE Webinar

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown restrictions have amplified the academic and policy interest in the causes and consequences of domestic violence. With this in mind, the FREE Network invited academic researchers to participate in an online workshop entitled "Economic perspectives on domestic violence". This policy brief is the first in a series of two briefs summarizing the papers presented at the workshop. The current brief addresses the presentations that had a more general focus on domestic violence. The second brief will discuss the papers devoted to the domestic violence implications of the pandemic.



Introduction

Domestic violence (DV), as well as one of its main forms - intimate partner violence (IPV) - are societal issues of massive proportion. The World Health Organization estimates that 1 in 3 women across 80 countries worldwide are victims of IPV during their lifetime (WHO, 2013). IPV imposes huge costs on society: its victims, for instance, are estimated to be twice as susceptible to depression and alcohol abuse, and 16% more likely to give birth to a low birth-weight child (WHO, 2013).

IPV separates itself from other types of violent offenses in several aspects. To start with, the intimate victim-perpetrator relationship causes IPV to be vastly underreported. The victim may have feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame, which could deter her from seeking support. Further, IPV and more generally DV cases also have high rates of attrition within the justice system. These distinct characteristics highlight the level of difficulty in developing policies aimed at helping victims of intimate partner abuse. The fact that the prevalence of IPV is widespread and at the same time vastly under-reported, casts doubt on the policy measures and legislation in place today.

This policy brief is the first in a series of two that summarizes the recent economic research on IPV presented in the workshop entitled “**Economic Perspectives on Domestic Violence**”. The workshop was organized as a part of the Forum for Research on Gender Economics (FROGEE) supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

Economic Determinants of Domestic Violence

A number of presentations in the workshop were devoted to the economic determinants of domestic violence.

[Andreas Kotsadam](#) presented a paper on the relationship between women’s employment and IPV in Ethiopia. The link between the two is

twofold: employment could increase women’s empowerment and, thereby, decrease IPV; however, the boost in empowerment could threaten the man’s status in (male-female) relationships, and lead to violent retaliation. Violence could also be used to extract economic resources from working women. To study which of these mechanisms prevail, the authors conducted an extensive field experiment collaborating with shoe and garment factories in Ethiopia. From a list of qualified job-candidates provided by employers, they randomly assigned 1500 equally qualified women living with partners to either getting a job (treatment group) or not (control group). Prior to treatment, women from both groups were interviewed and asked to answer various questions regarding intimate partner abuse. They were also called to a follow-up survey 6 months later. The statistical analysis of these answers fails to establish a causal link between employment status and the incidence of IPV.

Taking a more theoretical approach, [Paul Seabright](#)’s preliminary work on the determinants of IPV offered a dynamic framework modeling how (unpredictable) economic circumstances and (predictable) individuals’ traits influence domestic violence, as well as formation and dissolution of partnerships. The model distinguishes individuals in their ability to control resources within relationships without the use of violence (“skills”), and in their costs of engaging in violence (“temperament”). The model assumes that individuals with more violent temperaments are on average endowed with lower skills. It predicts women’s income and their risk of IPV should be negatively correlated cross-sectionally, but that positive shocks in income should increase IPV for married women while decreasing it for women with easier exit options. The authors test the model on survey data from Brazil and data on randomized expansions of a food-program in Ecuador. The results support the cross-sectional prediction and confirm that the effect of income shocks depends on exit options, though does



not support the prediction of an increase for married women.

Sonia Bhalotra's presentation addressed the DV consequences of another type of economic shock, namely female and male unemployment, and also considered the role of unemployment benefits as a mitigating factor. By exploiting an extensive dataset covering every court case in Brazil between 2009 and 2017, and information on mass layoffs at the local level, the study finds that the probability of a male being prosecuted for a DV crime increases by 32% when he loses his job and persists at similar levels 4 years after. For female job-loss, the corresponding effect is significantly larger and amounts to 52%. Bhalotra and her co-authors argue that the fact that unemployment of either the man or the woman leads to an increase in domestic violence is consistent with unemployment constituting a negative shock to income and a positive shock to time spent at home. They further argue that the larger impact of female relative to male unemployment is potentially consistent with the "*household bargaining model*", which encapsulates the idea that it becomes more difficult for a woman to leave a violent relationship when she is more economically dependent on her partner. Additional analysis shows that eligibility for unemployment insurance increases DV once benefits expire and that this is in turn a result of unemployment benefits increasing peoples' time in unemployment.

The Role of Police

Part of the workshop was dedicated to the role of the criminal justice system. A fact that stresses the importance of studying police behavior is that domestic abuse cases generally suffer from high legal attrition and most of them are dropped before reaching the court. Variation in the characteristics of law enforcement could likely play a role in explaining differences in DV across contexts.

In this vein, **Sofia Amaral** introduced a study on the relationship between gender diversity of the

police force and domestic violence in the UK. The gender-distribution within law enforcement is believed to directly influence DV in two ways: First, gender-based differences in attitudes and norms may influence police-handling in DV cases. Second, if the gender of the victim aligns with that of the officer, the victim may be more willing to cooperate and disclose evidence. The data shows that the total share of women in the police force is almost equal to that of men, but the tasks performed differ systematically across genders. Women are found to be overrepresented among call-handlers and underrepresented among first-response teams. For each position, Amaral and her co-authors investigate whether changes in gender-distribution influence the rate of legal attrition, rate of repeat victimization, and the amount of time spent at a scene (response duration). By analyzing police force and crime data the study shows that there are substantial efficiency gains from increasing gender diversity, particularly in first-response teams. An increase in the share of females in first-response teams increases response duration, reduces legal attrition, and decreases repeat victimization. There is an even larger effect when a female is the most experienced officer in the team. The gender of the call-handler has no significant effect on the outcomes of interest.

Along somewhat similar lines, **Victoria Endl-Geyer** presented research on the link between the quality of police response and DV in the UK. More specifically, the research explores how increased police response times, caused by police station closures in 2012, affected the rate of repeat victimization in DV cases. Faster police response times are believed to improve the victim's cooperation: If the police are quick to arrive at the scene, the victim gets less time to revise the initial assessment that she needed support. The results show that faster police responses are associated with a higher conviction rate. However, they also increase the likelihood of repeat victimization. A potential explanation could be the so-called "*reprisal effect*" – the perpetrator retaliates with



more violence as a response to being reported by his partner.

Criminalization

Many studies on IPV, including some that were presented at the workshop, highlight that an inherently good policy such as improving police response, sometimes leads to unintended negative consequences to victims. In the keynote speech, **Leigh Goodmark** addressed this topic by critically discussing the history, consequences, and alternatives to criminalization of IPV in the US. As suggested by her recent book, domestic violence has fallen in the US since the introduction of criminalization and mandatory arrest of IPV crimes. However, historical trends show that the overall crime rate has fallen to a greater extent. Goodmark provided several reasons why criminalization has likely been unsuccessful in deterring IPV. Some studies emphasize that it is the accountability and monitoring of perpetrators (even after incarceration) that has been effective in deterring IPV crimes and not the punishment itself. In fact, there are vast costs of DV criminalization occurring to victims of domestic abuse, such as financial instability caused by unemployment of (in many cases) the primary breadwinner in a household. Also, criminalization has been shown to exacerbate other correlates of IPV such as aggressive and hostile tendencies of the perpetrator. Goodmark proposed alternatives to DV criminalization that avoid such costs and thereby, are potentially more effective in reducing domestic abuse. First, there are solutions rooted in economics such as cash-transfer programs, employment training, and micro-financing. These types of measures can help to reduce the economic penalties of seeking support and strengthen the victim's financial independence. Also, more social solutions were suggested such as community organizing, restorative justice, and community accountability. Moreover, Goodmark underlined the fact that individuals with adverse childhood experiences, often involving violence, are significantly more likely to commit violent crimes

such as IPV. Identifying and intervening at an early age to educate these individuals about intimate relationships has been shown to be effective in dealing with the problem. In a nutshell, Goodmark stressed the importance of constructing a balanced policy approach that targets the origins of DV and argued that the time has come to reconsider punishing violence with more violence.

Reporting

Problems related to IPV misreporting were a recurring subject of discussion at the workshop. A lot of the previous research on IPV relies on direct surveys asking women whether they were a victim of different instances of IPV. The main problem associated with such surveys relates to accuracy: social factors such as stigma, shame, and/or self-blame, as well as privacy concerns, are likely to influence respondents' answers. A practice that has proven successful for sensitive questions is the use of an indirect method called *list experiments*, where the structure of the survey mitigates much of the above concerns on the respondent's side (see, e.g., <https://blogs.worldbank.org/impactevaluation/list-experiments-sensitive-questions-methods-blog>).

Veronica Frisanco presented a study on the gap in reporting originating from direct questionnaires vs. list experiments based on experimental evidence from Peru. The experiment considers two groups of 500 women each. Women in the first group participate in a survey that uses direct questionnaires, whereas those in the second group answer a survey using indirect questionnaires. Based on the answers, the authors obtain an IPV prevalence rate for each group and define under-reporting as the difference in prevalence between them, under the assumption that the rate of under-reporting in the presence of indirect questionnaires is minor. Unexpectedly, yet encouraging, they find no evidence of misreporting in the direct-questions method. However, when looking closer at different



education levels, they find that under-reporting is significantly more prevalent for highly educated women. In other words, less educated women are more truthful when answering questions about IPV. Frisancho emphasized that these types of patterns make it more difficult to identify the most vulnerable groups, implying that direct methods could increase the risk of mistargeted policies.

More generally, there are several reasons why respondents may be less truthful when answering questions related to IPV. On the one hand, individuals may be aware that they are victims of abuse, but perhaps are unwilling to confess due to stigma. On the other hand, it could be that individuals fail to identify themselves as victims of abuse at all, and do not consider their relationship unhealthy. Against this background, **Nishith Prakash** presented preliminary results of an ongoing study on behavioral barriers to the demand for DV-support services. The baseline results of the survey indicate belief gaps among women who scored high on levels of abuse: a significant majority of abuse victims rated their relationship as healthy. While 46.43% of respondents report some form of physical, emotional, or sexual violence, the portion of those with the prior belief that they are in an abusive relationship is only 1%. The study also finds that stress about Covid-19 correlates with higher levels of self-blame, abuse, and lower levels of understanding of what abusive behaviors are.

The covid-19 pandemic and its massive repercussions on determinants of DV such as mobility, economic insecurity, and social isolation have offered new possibilities for researchers to study the underlying causes of DV, while also making DV research ever more important. The next policy brief in this series will summarize the presentations which were specifically devoted to the consequences of the pandemic on DV. On behalf of **FROGEE** and **SITE**, we would like to

thank the speakers for their contributions to the understanding of this topic, which will be indispensable both to the academic community and to policymakers in their efforts to design more effective policies for the future. We would also like to thank **SIDA** for generous financial support.

References

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List of Participants

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