



Suicide and property rights in India[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the impact of female property rights on male and female suicide rates in India. Using state level variation in legal changes to women's property rights, we show that better property rights for women are associated with a *decrease* in the difference between female and male suicide rates, but an *increase* in both male and female suicides. We conjecture that increasing female property rights increased conflict within household and this increased conflict resulted in more suicides among both men and women in India. Using individual level data on domestic violence we find evidence that increased property rights for women did increase the incidence of wife beating in India. A model of intra-household bargaining with asymmetric information and costly conflict is consistent with these findings.

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1. Introduction

Suicide rates in India have increased steadily over the last few decades.¹ The WHO estimates that there were 190,000 adult suicide deaths in India in 2010 alone. Suicide has become the second leading cause of death among young Indians – it is the cause of twice as many deaths as HIV/AIDS and almost the same number as maternal deaths in young women (Patel et al., 2012).² This paper studies the impact of female property rights on male and female suicide rates in India.³ Using state level variation in legal changes to women's property rights, we show that better property rights for women are

associated with a *decrease* in the difference between female and male suicide rates, but an *increase* in both male and female suicides.⁴ The large majority of suicide victims in India are married and the broad class of 'family problems' is the main reported cause of suicide for both men and women. Using a simple model of intra-household bargaining with asymmetry of information, we show how strengthening women's inheritance rights can raise *intra-household conflict* and increase suicide rates.

In line with the recent literature on the economics of the family, our theoretical model assumes that cooperation in a marriage can generate some gains and that spouses bargain over the allocation of consumptions in the household under the threat of separation (divorce or 'separate spheres model' a la Lundberg and Pollak (1993)). To this basic framework, we add two elements: asymmetry of information and costly conflict. Private information can generate delays and bargaining failure. Hence, we follow Bloch and Rao (2002) and assume that husbands and wives derive some private value of their union that is not known to their spouse.⁵ Moreover, we aim to capture the idea that *conflict is an integral part of the bargaining process*. When an offer (regarding the division of resources) is rejected, conflict ensues. Threatening separation does create an atmosphere of discord within the household that comes at a cost, and separation cannot be achieved instantaneously. At any point though, individuals may instead choose the ultimate *exit* and commit

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¹ The estimated rate of increase is more than 40%. More detailed verbal autopsy studies suggest that annual suicide rates could be six to nine times these official rates (refer to Vijayakumar, 2010).

² India is second only to China in terms of total number of suicides. Relative female to male mortality rates from this cause are high in both these countries compared to other regions. Refer to Anderson and Ray (2010) for an analysis of excess female mortality at different ages by cause of death in China and India.

³ The estimated rate of increase is more than 40%. More detailed verbal autopsy studies suggest that annual suicide rates could be six to nine times these official rates (refer to Vijayakumar, 2010).

⁴ These results are obtained while controlling for state and year fixed effects, socio-economic controls and robust to using political variables as instruments for pro-women legislative changes.

⁵ See also Friedberg and Stern (2010) and Bobonis et al. (2013).

suicide. Hence, separations and suicides are predicted by the model.⁶ We show that a pro-women redistribution of resources often increases the likelihood of conflict between husband and wives, in which case male suicide increases and the ratio of female to male suicide rates decreases.

Consistently, we provide suggestive evidence that *marital discord* may be the main channel through which improving female property rights raised suicides. We show that the state changes that strengthen female property rights for women are associated with an increase in the suicide rate from family problems but have no significant impact on suicides from other causes. Moreover, using alternative individual level data, which contains measures of domestic violence, we find evidence that increased property rights for women did increase the incidence of wife beating in India. This is consistent with our hypothesis that increasing female property rights increased conflict within household and it is this increased conflict which resulted in more suicides among both men and women in India.

There is a large sociological literature in sociology, following Durkheim's (1897) ground breaking work, studying empirically the relationship between marriage and suicides has been much, though the topic has been mostly ignored in economics.⁷ This sociological literature has long recognized the tendency for higher suicide rates, for both men and women, to be associated with increased equality across the sexes. It emphasizes how increased opportunities for women can accentuate tensions and marital discord within households, by challenging traditional roles, increasing the importance of negotiation and raising the potential for conflict. There are numerous empirical accounts investigating the possible consequences of female empowerment on suicides. For example, in the United States, Stack (1987) found a positive relationship between the labor force participation of wives and both the male and female suicide rates over the period 1948–1963, when antipathy towards female labor participation prevailed; and a smaller, but still positive relationship, with male suicide rates over the 1964–1980 period when female labor participation was more widely accepted.⁸ Similarly, cross-country studies find a concave effect of female labor participation on the female to male suicide ratio and a positive correlation between the UNDP's Gender Empowerment Measure (a measure of women's access to social, political, and economic power) and suicide rates for both women and men (Pampel, 1998).⁹ In China, the marriage law in 1950 that granted women the right to choose their own partners, demand a divorce, inherit property, and control of their children, might have resulted in an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 suicides and murders of women between 1950 and 1953 (Das Gupta et al., 2000).¹⁰

Economists and sociologists have studied and found conflicting information on the association between violence and women's empowerment, particularly in terms of economic opportunity, control of assets and social group participation. In India for instance, some studies find that women with greater economic resources, such as ownership of land or employment were less likely to report violence (for example, Panda and Agarwal, 2005), while in others, employed women have

been found to report violence more frequently than unemployed women, and this is despite the higher income resulting from female employment (see for instance, Eswaran and Malhorta 2011). Likewise, Luke and Munshi (2011) find that when women in the tea plantations in South India earn a higher share of the household income, the probability of marital violence increases. In the context of Progresia in Mexico, Bobonis et al. (2013) and Bobonis (2011) find that although women in recipient households were significantly less likely to be victims of physical abuse than women in comparable non-beneficiary households, they were more likely to be victims of emotional violence and more likely to separate.

To be sure, this paper is not suggesting that improving female property rights is undesirable. Until recently, women have been excluded from land rights in many societies and their ability to inherit property has largely been restricted. A growing body of empirical evidence shows that improving women's asset ownership, relative income, or ability to control land impacts the intra-household allocation of resources towards children (among others Lundberg et al., 1997; Duflo and Udry, 2004; Bobonis, 2009). That improvements in women's relative position in the household can be desirable, not only on equity, but also on efficiency grounds is a frequent justification for policies targeting women, such as microcredit and conditional cash transfers. Moreover, there is evidence that making inheritance laws more egalitarian between sons and daughters has had desirable consequences in India. For example, Roy (2013) and Deininger et al. (2013) show that the legal changes to women's property rights that we consider here increased daughters' likelihood to inherit land, women's age at marriage and the educational attainment of daughters.¹¹

Our model predicts that women's *expected* welfare rises due to increased female property rights. When wives contribute a greater proportion of the total family wealth, they do no longer accept any allocation offered by their husbands. Women expect, and are more likely to get, a more equitable share of consumption. However, as a consequence of these higher expectations, conflict within the household can rise and result in higher suicide rates for both men and women.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section presents a theoretical model linking female property rights and suicides. Section 3 discusses the changes in female property rights that we study and Section 4 describes our data. Section 5 contains our empirical analysis. Section 6 provides further discussion and Section 7 concludes.

2. A model of household conflict

This section presents a model of intra-household bargaining with asymmetry of information that captures the idea that, within a household, arguing is akin to starting a conflict. While bargaining and conflict are most often studied separately or as alternatives, there is a burgeoning literature that recognizes that conflict is often an intrinsic part of bargaining (see Sanchez-Pages, 2009 and the signaling models of domestic violence of Bloch and Rao (2002) and Bobonis (2013)).

In our model, husbands and wives can use their resources to generate a surplus, and they bargain over its allocation. As is common in the literature on intra-household bargaining, who owns the resources in the household matters by affecting the outside options of the spouses.¹² In order for bargaining to fail some of the time, we assume that spouses derive some private satisfaction with the marriage, whose magnitude is unknown to their partner. But what is distinct in this model is that we assume that when an offer is rejected, marital discord or conflict ensues. This comes at a cost to each spouse, and a cost whose magnitude is realized only at the time of the conflict. Separation cannot be achieved without going through a period of marital conflict. In contrast, suicide, the ultimate exit, can be achieved instantaneously.

⁶ Our analysis will focus on suicides as the outcome of interest since separation and divorce are extremely rare in the Indian context and we have no data which speak to this issue. In Ligon et al.'s (2004) dynamic model of bargaining, where divorce and suicide can occur, a key assumption is that there is a strong advantage to being the one leaving the other that can create a prisoner dilemma type of situation. When the marriage surplus is small (due to a shock), this preemptive advantage can make it impossible for the couple to stay together. If now one of the party prefers committing suicide than staying alone, suicide would result. However, it is not clear that such a preemptive advantage exists in the case of India.

⁷ Ligon et al. (2004) and Stevenson and Wolfers (2006) being two exceptions.

⁸ Similar relationships are found for Canada (Trovato and Vos, 1992).

⁹ Mayer (2003) finds similar correlations in India using state-wide variation in gender-related development indexes.

¹⁰ Suicides of married women and men as a response to family conflict are a common occurrence particularly in developing countries. Canetto (2008) discusses the cultural ramifications of suicide – that relative to developed countries, where suicidal behavior tends to be interpreted as a symptom of individual mental health, in poorer countries, suicide is often considered a normal, albeit last resort response, to a serious family conflict.

¹¹ See also Brule (2012) and Rosenblum (forthcoming).

¹² In the 'unitary' model of the household, who owns the resources does not affect any of the household choices. This model has been empirically rejected in most contexts.

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