



Research paper

The endogeneity of domestic violence: Understanding women empowerment through autonomy

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 January 2016

Revised 31 August 2016

Accepted 21 September 2016

Keywords:

Domestic violence

Autonomy

South Asia

Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

Women's autonomy is known to incite intimate partner violence (IPV) in developing countries. We argue for the endogeneity of women's autonomy with IPV, which is often ignored in the existing literature, for understanding the causal association. Using the Bangladesh Demography and Health Survey (2007), we isolate the effect of autonomy on IPV taking into account the possible endogeneity using instrument variables and special regressor estimations, proposing the special regressor as a more reliable approach to estimating binary choice models with discrete endogenous regressors. Our study finds increased women's autonomy to lead to higher incidents of IPV for a South Asian patriarchal society such as Bangladesh. Thereby, policies catered towards women empowerment by increasing women's autonomy should concurrently focus on other determinants of IPV. Undue male controlling behaviour, witnessing inter-parental abuse as a child and early marriage are also found to aggravate IPV. Hence there should be simultaneous programmes that aim to relax male controlling behaviour over women, provide counselling for those who have witnessed inter-parental abuse as a child, and laws prohibiting child marriage, still prevalent in South Asian societies, should be reinforced. These findings have strong policy implications suggesting the dual nature of improving women's autonomy in empowering women while aggravating IPV.

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1. Introduction

The belief that women's autonomy in public and private spheres is crucial in affecting the power dynamics between husband and wife within households is widely held by policy-makers and activists alike. In order to subjugate women, intimate partner violence (IPV) is often employed as a tool to maintain male dominance. Attempts to break away from this patriarchal trend through force have fostered policies geared towards securing women's independence in financial matters, reproductive and household decision-making. However, it is ambiguous whether these policies help prevent IPV.

One proposition is that the subordination of wives in the household and public spheres is part of the cultural norm in resource-poor societies, upholding the belief that their economic dependence on their husbands grant the latter the right to commit IPV, especially when women have no say concerning household matters (Schuler & Islam, 2008). IPV is internalised, ergo, does

the job of diminishing women's autonomy. However, it can also be reasoned, that with greater autonomy, there is greater prevalence of IPV, as masculine hegemony feels threatened. (Eswaran & Malhotra, 2011).

The main focus of this paper rests to verify whether women's autonomy, i.e., power within private and public domains, affects incidence of IPV or is affected by it, in societies like that of Bangladesh.

It is naïve to assume, that there is a causal link running from greater autonomy towards reduction in the instances of IPV, and that, as a consequence, the key to lessening the acts of violence against the wife is to improve the woman's socioeconomic condition by allowing more physical mobility and greater decision-making power over the household and financial matters, as well as children's welfare. However, in light of possible endogeneity, correlations based on changes in women's autonomy and in IPV incidents are not compelling. Developing a causal link necessitates an appropriate instrumental variables strategy. Although studies have recognised this endogeneity problem, not many have focused on attending to this problem in their econometric estimation leading to biases.

Surely, besides autonomy, many other individual, economic, and socio-hierarchical factors render women susceptible to

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increased incidents of domestic violence. In this study, we use data from 2007 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Surveys (BDHS) and investigate two primary questions: (1) We specifically look into the role of women's autonomy, women's involvement with NGOs, and spousal controlling behaviour as determinants of IPV; and (2) We study the relevance of intergenerational impact of witnessing IPV between parents on the present generation. Alongside, the influence of individual and household level control factors on IPV, such as employment, education, use of menstrual regulation, household wealth, and household size, is also investigated.

The paper has been organised as follows: Section 2 generates a discussion on our variables of interest as determinants of IPV and previous findings in the available literature. Section 3 deals with the methodology, identifies, and details how the outcome and predictor variables have been prepared, provides rationale for our instrument variables, and finally discusses the estimation strategies being employed. In Section 4, we present and discuss the results, finally concluding the study in Section 5.

2. Endogeneity: domestic violence and women's autonomy

The acceptance, thereby, perpetuation of IPV may be more likely to exist in families where women have weaker autonomy. These women, with no other means of fending for themselves, are less likely to show any resistance lest they are left by their husbands.

Additionally, evolutionary theory suggests that a woman's working outside of the house may invoke distrust, which may trigger the need to control her movement. In fact, it is found that a woman working for a family member is less likely to face IPV than one working for someone else (Eswaran & Malhotra, 2011). Additionally, women with independent sources of income may face IPV used as a means to acquire the resource which would offset their autonomy (Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, & Akhter, 1996). Violence is a plausible instrument to control women's mobility, behaviour, and sexuality.

Not much of the prevalent literature deals with this endogeneity. Eswaran and Malhotra (2011) define women's autonomy as their involvement in decision-making and have found a negative effect of IPV on autonomy. The effect was larger when they treated domestic violence as an endogenous variable, compared to ordinary least squares (OLS) estimate. In the latter, ignoring the reverse causality between the two resulted in biased estimators.

To account for this endogeneity between IPV and women's autonomy, instrumental variables (IVs) have been used in this paper. As we will soon encounter, because our dependent variable is binary with a discrete endogenous regressor, we compare and contrast several IV methods of estimation. To that note, it is worth mentioning that this study is novel in applying the special regressor method in the case of IPV.

2.1. Women's autonomy

Most surveys do not capture whether a person's behaviour is submissive by choice or as a result of spousal control. IPV may be used to appropriate a woman's income/savings, or to assert dominance when questioned about household debts (Schuler et al., 1996). This suggests that men may feel compelled to exert physical force to establish their authority.

The association between women's autonomy and IPV was found to be statistically significant, albeit very slightly, among women in rural Bangladesh (Koenig, Ahmed, Hossain, & Mozumder, 2003). Interestingly, a study in Sub-Saharan Africa looked into the acceptance of wife-beating attitudes, and women from Mali (OR = 1.05), Rwanda (OR = 1.05), Uganda (OR = 1.08), and Zimbabwe

(OR = 1.06) with no participation in the decision-making process were more likely to accept wife-beating (Rani, Bonu, & Diop-Sidibe, 2004). Reciprocally, men who believed women should not engage in decision-making were more likely to be accepting IPV.

The association between decision-making power and IPV was seen to be positive in contrast to households with more equal decision-making settings in Latin America (Flake & Forste, 2006; Friedemann-Sánchez & Lovatón, 2012). Moreover, Kabeer (1997) puts forth that the potential to escape a bad marriage decreases the likelihood of domestic violence, unless for women whose incomes are insufficient to support themselves (Pitt, Rosenzweig, & Hassan, 2012).

Heath (2014) from a household survey outside Dhaka, Bangladesh, found evidence that maintains instrumental violence theory where a woman has a lower risk of IPV upon entering the labour-force if she had higher bargaining power to begin with. She posits that the relationship is not solely dependent on woman's work giving her more autonomy.

Furthermore, Rahman, Nakamura, Seino, and Kizuki (2013), using the 2007 BDHS data, targeted women between ages 15 and 49 but found no statistically significant difference between the experiences of any form of IPV (whether physical and/or sexual) and extent of their decision-making power. Compiling this dataset with 2005–2006 Indian National Family Health Survey, Rapp, Zoch, Khan, Pollmann, & Krämer (2012) also did not find any significant relationship between their autonomy index and experiences of IPV. However, neither studies controlled for the possible endogeneity.

Keeping with Eswaran and Malhotra (2011), we treat autonomy as an endogenous determinant of IPV, constructing the variable with mobility, financial, and decision making dimensions.

2.2. Controlling behaviour

From the theoretical household bargaining models, a link between women's autonomy over economic resources and domestic violence can be established apropos of her bargaining power at the time of marriage (Eswaran & Malhotra, 2011; Rao, 1997; Tauchen, White, & Long, 1991). The husband may use IPV to counter the wife's increased bargaining if she starts earning. Alternatively, women, whose initial bargaining power is higher than the aforementioned, may be less likely to face IPV, being capable surviving outside marriage. These suggest that domestic violence is used as an instrument of control apropos of household members' behaviour or the distribution of resources.

Villarreal (2007) ran probit regressions using household relationship data from Mexico preparing two models: One treating the women's employment as exogenous and the other as endogenous. In the first, women who experienced coercive control were more likely to face IPV (OR = 0.0247). However, the second denies the former result showing that a woman with active employment is half as likely to experience IPV (OR = −0.507).

In rural Bangladesh, women were more likely to be beaten if they failed to fulfil gender roles, even on the account of being ill; and the men justified wife-beating as their rights over their wives, normalising it with respect to religious scripts and disciplining their wives (Schuler et al., 1996).

Further, in another study by World Health Organization (2005), 31% of the physically abused women reported controlling behaviour from their partners which included refraining her from social interactions with friends and family, expecting her to seek permission before pursuing medical attention, and persistently accusing her of infidelity (Åsling-Monemi, Naved, & Persson, 2008). Of the 226 women suffering high levels of controlling behaviour, 60% had been physically abused, 32% had been severely so, and 60% had been sexually violated.

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