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Women's Access to Labor Market Opportunities, Control of Household Resources, and Domestic Violence: Evidence from Bangladesh

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Summary. — While there are many positive societal implications of increased female labor force participation, working may increase a woman's risk of domestic violence. Using data I collected from Bangladesh, I document a positive correlation between work and domestic violence, but only among women with low education or young age at marriage. These results suggest that women with low bargaining power face increased risk of domestic violence upon entering the labor force as their husbands seek to counteract their increased bargaining power. Consequently, policies that increase women's baseline bargaining power will decrease the risk that they face domestic violence upon beginning work.

Key words — domestic violence, female labor force participation, intra-household bargaining, South Asia, Bangladesh

1. INTRODUCTION

Access to labor market opportunities is frequently believed to improve the lives of women. For instance, promoting women's access to economic opportunities is listed in the World Bank's 2012 World Development Report as one of its top five policy priorities in promoting gender equality. Indeed, there are both theoretical arguments and empirical evidence that womens' access to labor market opportunities decreases early marriage and childbearing (Jensen, 2012; Singh & Samara, 1996) and improves women's bargaining power within the household (Anderson & Eswaran, 2009; Dharmalingam & Morgan, 1996; Majlesi, 2012; Rahman & Rao, 2004). Moreover, labor force opportunities can increase health and educational investments in children of mothers who work (Atkin, 2009; Luke & Munshi, 2011) or whose parents enroll them in school to improve their chances of gaining better jobs in the future (Oster & Millett, 2010).

However, job opportunities may have unintended negative consequences for women if work changes relations within the household and their husbands respond with increased domestic violence. Theoretical household bargaining models show how a woman's access to economic opportunities can either decrease or increase violence, depending on her initial level of bargaining power (Eswaran & Malhotra, 2011; Rao, 1997; Tauchen, Witte, & Long, 1991). A woman could face higher risk of domestic violence after beginning work as her husband seeks to offset the increased bargaining power that her income would otherwise bring her. Alternatively, an increase in bargaining power for a woman who already has high bargaining power can decrease domestic violence, since work opportunities increase her ability to flee a bad marriage. These types of models, which posit that domestic violence is a tool used by men to control household resources or the behavior of household members, are often called instrumental violence theories. By contrast, expressive violence theories argue that violence serves a direct purpose, such as relieving frustration.

Empirical tests of the effects of work opportunities on domestic violence have demonstrated both possibilities: Hjort and Villanger (2011) find that randomized job offers from Ethiopian flower factories increase the likelihood that a woman suffers physical violence, while Aizer (2010) finds that increases in relative female wages decrease domestic violence in the US, where women presumably do have higher baseline bargaining power. Other studies show mixed results on the correlation between whether a woman works and domestic violence (Vyas & Watts, 2009). [1]

This paper documents evidence of this heterogeneity within a common population. I examine the relationship between a woman's labor force participation, variables that proxy her bargaining power before entering the labor force, and likelihood that she has suffered domestic violence. I use unique data that I collected in a set of 60 villages just outside of Dhaka, Bangladesh that are particularly diverse in population and job characteristics. These villages have become increasing influenced by the growth of Dhaka and its surrounding garment factories, but retain some of the traditions of village life (such as an extended family living together in an arrangement called a *bari*). I find a descriptive relationship between these variables that is consistent with a model in which a woman's bargaining power before entering the labor force is an important determinant of whether she faces domestic violence upon entering the labor force. Specifically, there is a positive correlation between whether a woman works and the possibility that she suffers domestic violence, but this correlation disappears among women who are more educated or were older at first marriage.

These results are consistent with qualitative evidence from fieldwork in Bangladesh and existing quantitative evidence. Specifically, women I interviewed during my fieldwork

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described how receiving a salary allows them to feel more comfortable asserting a say in household decision-making but that this assertiveness can lead to conflicts, which might break down into violence. Along these lines, Friedemann-Sánchez and Lovatón (2012) and Flake and Forste (2006) both find that households in Colombia and throughout Latin America, respectively, in which the woman has most of the decision-making power have higher levels of domestic violence than households with egalitarian decision-making. Existing qualitative evidence also documents the relationship between employment opportunities and woman's outside option: Kabeer (1997) points out that factory employment allows a woman to flee bad conditions within a marriage. A nontrivial number of garment workers do actually leave bad situations (Sultan Ahmed & Bould, 2004), suggesting that this is a valid option. Furthermore, as would be predicted by a household bargaining model, Kabeer (1997) points out that the ability to leave improves a woman's treatment even if she does not actually leave. If less educated women—who do tend to earn less than non-educated women in Bangladesh (Pitt, Rosenzweig, & Hassan, 2012)—are less able to provide for themselves on their own, then they may not be able to translate work opportunities into less violence through the credible threat to leave a violent marriage.

I then utilize the detailed information I collected on other household variables to look for evidence for alternative models proposed by different disciplines that could explain the positive correlation between work and domestic violence among women with less education or a higher age at marriage (which I will refer to jointly as lower status women). However, I do not find evidence consistent with an assortative matching story in which higher status women attract more enlightened husbands who do not resort to domestic violence to reassert control after a woman enters the labor force. I also do not find support for predictions of theories of expressive violence or backlash, in which men use violence to reassert their masculine identity in response to woman's newfound earnings potential (Barker, 2001; Barker & Ricardo, 2005) or mobility (Rafi, Banu, Alim, & Akter, 2003). Finally, the results are also inconsistent with a model in which lower status women tend to join the labor force in response to a negative economic shock, which might both frustrate their husband and incite domestic violence (Renzetti, 2009). Crucial to disentangling these stories is the fact that I collected data on assets and income (including from agriculture and household enterprise) as well as measures of domestic violence, which are rare to have in the same data.

Previous literature on domestic violence and female labor force participation has not focused on how a woman's characteristics affect whether she faces domestic violence upon entering the labor force. Documenting this heterogeneity is important to policymakers who want to target interventions at female workers who are particularly likely to suffer domestic violence. Moreover, the results in this paper can help explain how studies in various settings have found both positive, negative, and zero correlation between domestic violence and women's labor force participation. These studies may all be consistent with the instrumental violence model implied by the findings in this paper, which predicts that the relationship between female labor force participation and domestic violence depends on the baseline level of bargaining power of women in the population studied. So while raising women's bargaining power high enough can allow her to escape domestic violence, increased bargaining power among women who have low baseline bargaining power may increase domestic violence. It is therefore important to consider this possibility when designing programs meant to improve women's access to the labor force or empowerment more generally.

2. EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

(a) *Data*

The data for this paper come from a survey of 1395 households outside of Dhaka, Bangladesh that I conducted, along with Mushfiq Mobarak. The survey took place from August to October, 2009. The sampling frame of the survey was every household [2] in 60 villages located in four subdistricts (Savar and Dhamrai in Dhaka District; Gazipur Sadar and Kaliakur in the Gazipur District). For each household selected for the survey, the household was asked to identify its head, and both the head and his or her spouse (if present) were surveyed. [3] The head was asked about the household's assets and income; the wife (regardless of whether she was considered to be the head) was asked about children's health and education and her status within the home (including domestic violence). The husband knew that his wife would be surveyed, but not the details of the questions or that she would be asked about domestic violence.

The survey villages are close to Dhaka but not within the city; the average reported travel time into Dhaka is 30 min. On average, each village has 1782 people living in 465 households. This area has many garment factories: 34% of sampled women between the ages of 18 and 35 work in the garment industry. Unlike garment factories within large cities, though, the factories in which survey respondents work rarely have dormitories. Instead, garment workers commute (traveling an average of 18 min one-way) to factories but live in standard household arrangements. Many households are migrants from other areas of Bangladesh; [4] only 49.0% of adult men and 32.1% of adult women were born in the subdistrict in which they now reside. Information gathered during our fieldwork suggests that these villages are cohesive villages that have existed for a long time but have had their demographic composition and economic opportunities affected by the widening borders of Dhaka.

Table 1 provide summary statistics of married women in the data, broken down by whether they are currently working for pay. Since women who work for pay are on average younger (27.7 years old) than women who do not work for pay (who are on average 34.1 years old), I also display the difference in means (women who work outside the home *vs.* women who do not) after controlling for age. Taking into account these age differences is important. For instance, while women who work for pay on average have 0.7 years more education than those who do not, a woman who works for pay has on average 0.4 years less education than a woman of the same age who does not work for pay. Despite less education, women who work for pay have a marginally higher age at marriage, fewer children, and a smaller age difference between husband and wife, relative to women of the same age who do not work for pay. They are also considerably more likely to be migrants than women who do not work for pay: 2.9% of women who work for pay are originally from the village in which they are currently living, *versus* 13.5% of women who do not work for pay.

There are similarly nuanced results on the overall economic household economic standing of households in which the wife does or does not work for pay. The husband is more likely to work for pay if the wife does (85%, *versus* 55% of husbands whose wives do not work for pay). However, if the husband