WHEN WIVES GO OUT TO WORK, MEN’S CHALLENGED BREADWINNER STATUS CAN LEAD TO INCREASED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: Evidence from Spain

As more women become breadwinners in traditional cultures, so they are more likely to suffer domestic violence. That is the central finding of research by Ana Tur-Prats, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Geneva in August 2016. Her analysis of Spanish data from 1999 to 2011 examines the effect of cultural norms, rather than individual tastes, on the level of domestic violence.

When female unemployment falls relative to males, there are two competing hypotheses: on one hand, as relative female employment increases, it implies a reduction in domestic violence as women have more ‘outside options’. On the other hand, if male members of the family feel that female employment is a threat to their status, this could be associated with an increase in violence instead.

In the most traditional societies, the research finds the latter effect dominates: when female unemployment decreases by one percentage point, domestic violence increases by 0.56 percentage points. In more gender-equal societies, there is no evidence of this ‘backlash’ behaviour.

The author concludes: ‘My research suggests that it’s vital to consider deeply embedded cultural norms when designing policies to combat violence against women.’

More…

The last recession brought about a large increase in unemployment, and we have learned a great deal about the consequences of unemployment on household income and public expenditure. But an unresolved issue is how unemployment affects domestic violence.

In principle, it is not clear what the impact would be. Let’s take, for example, a decrease in female unemployment relative to male unemployment. One could think that this reduction leads to an improvement in women’s ‘outside options’, which would lessen violence against them. But the opposite might occur if some men perceive this as an insult to their masculinity and react aggressively against their intimate partners.

The author explains her research: I find that men’s response to relative changes in unemployment is mediated by cultural factors. In more traditional societies, in which for centuries men have been considered the main providers of family income, a decrease in female unemployment relative to male unemployment is associated with an increase in domestic violence. If female unemployment decreases by one percentage point, domestic violence in the most traditional society would increase 0.56 percentage points (which represents 6.3% of the sample mean).

My explanation is that these men may consider the relative improvement of female labour market opportunities a threat to their breadwinner role. And they might use violence against their intimate partners as a way to reinstate their authority. In more gender-equal societies, where both men and women have historically contributed to family income, I do not find this backlash behaviour.
But what makes a society more or less gender-equal? I argue that the family structure, by determining female participation in production, can shape the cultural norms regarding the appropriate roles of men and women.

In previous work, I show that in ‘stem families’ – where typically one son stays in the parental homestead together with his parents and wife – co-residence with the mother-in-law allowed for a more productive role of the younger wife. Since the older woman took care of the house and the kids, the younger and stronger wife could work together with her husband in the fields leading to more egalitarian gender roles.

In contrast, in ‘nuclear families’ – where there is no cohabitation with the parents on reaching adulthood – female activities were generally restricted to the domestic sphere and men were the household’s main earners. These cultural norms persist even after these traditional family types are no longer socially predominant.

In my empirical analysis, I use Spanish data as this country provides intimate-partner-violence measures of the highest quality and the geographical distribution of these family structures (stem and nuclear) was persistent broadly since the Middle Ages until the second half of the twentieth century. Intimate-partner violence and unemployment rates are computed using survey data for the period 1999-2011, and traditional family types are measured using historical census data.

To sum up, my research shows that men react differently to relative changes in unemployment, in accordance with their underlying gender identity, which is defined by their social group. This introduces a novel approach in the way economists conceptually think about domestic violence: we need to go beyond individual tastes and motivations and bring in the social context.

From a policy perspective, this research suggests that deeply embedded cultural norms should also be considered when designing policies to fight violence against women.

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