

The effect of adoption of pro-women domestic violence  
policy on dowry violence: evidence from India

**(Extended Abstract)**

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# 1 Introduction

Domestic violence is rampant in several south-Asian countries, including India. The government of India enacted the *Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA)* in the year 2005 to provide relief to women subjected to domestic abuse. Under the PWDVA a woman can register a police complaint against the husband not only on the grounds of physical abuse but also financial and emotional abuse. Unlike that in the industrialised countries, most incidences of domestic abuse in India are tied to dowry demands made by the husband and his family. Very often this leads to conflict between husbands and wives. In extreme cases, this can lead to an uxoricide. It is noteworthy that even though it is illegal to exchange dowry in India since 1961 under the Dowry Prohibition Act, the institution of dowry and dowry deaths continues to this date. Hence, a priori it is not clear whether the adoption of the new policy will have an mitigating effect on dowry related deaths.

This paper first develops a theoretical model of domestic violence and then tests the predications of the model using district level data from India. The model predicts that higher reporting of domestic abuse (following the adoption of domestic violence act, which reduces the costs of reporting domestic violence) can avert subsequent dowry related murders but the effect of the policy on non-fatal wife-beating is ambiguous.<sup>1</sup> The model incorporates a loophole in the legislation in its present form, namely the possibility of false reporting by wives and highlights the fact that this potentially erodes the effectiveness of the policy. Finally, the paper tests the predictions of the model using the exogenous variation in the reporting costs following the adoption of the law across Indian districts from 2001-2012. The preliminary analysis shows that reporting of domestic abuse has sharply increased in the post policy period and the rate of dowry deaths has also declined slightly, particularly in regions where there was a close election between a male and a female candiate.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. It is possibly the one of the

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<sup>1</sup>In the post-policy period reporting costs are lower since (a) to report physical abuse the victim no longer needs a certificate from a medical practitioner to prove that her life is in danger (b) she can report verbal, emotional and financial abuse as well

first papers that considers the effectiveness of PWDVA in reducing spousal homicides using district level data in India from 2001-2012. Secondly, demographers and social scientists have proposed several strategies to combat domestic violence in South Asia such as empowering women by providing them educating and employment. The performance of the PWDVA would provide valuable insights about whether a well designed legislations can help reduce intimate partner violence.

## 2 Theory

The paper begins with a deterministic model of domestic violence that illustrates the basic theme of the paper: In this model, husbands want to extract additional dowry from the wives and domestic violence is used to signal the husband's type (Violent or V-type and Not Violent or NV-type). Meeting dowry demands is costly for the wife and so she chooses to pay-up (P) only if she is married to a V-type husband, who can inflict life-threatening injuries on her if payments are not made. The alternative is to report to the police (R) following which the husband could put an end to beatings (DA) or kill (A) the wife. Wives vary according to their ability to meet the dowry demand of husbands.  $W_1$  type wives can pay additional dowry but  $W_2$  wives cannot. This is public information. A husband of either type can announce a dowry demand that the wife cannot meet because he is open to remarrying.

I solve for the perfect Bayesian equilibrium of the game separately for the sample of  $W_1$  and  $W_2$  wives. I show that for the former group, there is a pooling equilibrium where husbands choose B regardless of type; the wife's posterior probability of the husband being of type-V is same as the prior probability. Given her beliefs, she chooses P over R. For the sample of  $W_2$  wives, there is a separating equilibrium: the V-types choose to beat and assault the wife (B) whereas S-types do not beat (NB) the wife. The results can be explained intuitively. Domestic violence (B) is higher when the return from battering the wife is high (for the sample of  $W_1$  wives). There are no dowry-related uxoricides in this model as the

wives are rich enough to buy their freedom. The  $W_2$  wives, on the other hand, cannot afford to pay up and so they choose to report domestic abuse. The set of  $W_2$  wives who are married to type-V husbands end up being assaulted (A) and are potentially killed. The other half (those married to S-types), do not even face domestic violence.

Next, I introduce the domestic violence policy into the model. This significantly increases the husband's cost of assaulting the wife following a prior domestic violence complaint. Under the new policy regime,  $W_1$  wives benefit because now a separating equilibrium can be supported where only the V-types beat; the NV-types do not beat. Hence, there is lower incidence of domestic violence (B). The  $W_2$  wives benefit because even though they endure same amount of beatings (B) there are not dowry related deaths (DA is chosen over A).

Next, I generalize the model by allowing the husband's type to vary continuously by the his taste for domestic violence. The wives also differ along two dimensions: by discrete amount of their ability to pay dowry and continuously by the utility derived from falsely charging the husband of domestic abuse. I show that this set-up supports a semi-separating equilibrium. Once again, the key results of the deterministic model holds in this version of the model as well. However, false reporting augment the attractiveness of violence (B) and makes the policy less effective. One potential solution is might be to introduce mandatory counseling sessions to families affected by domestic violence, which would make false reporting costly for wives.

### 3 Empirical Strategy and Data

Recently, Iyer and Mani and Mishra and Topalova (2012) show that in India reporting of domestic violence is high in districts with higher female political representation. The authors did not find significant effect of higher female representation on murders of women and men. In another related paper on India, Clots-Figueras (2012) demonstrates that the presence of female leaders is associated with better educational outcomes for children in the urban

areas but not in rural areas. The paper uses the fraction of constituencies in a district won by a female candidate in an close election as an instrument for the presence of female leaders in the Indian districts. In the current study, I exploit the instrument utilized in the second paper for higher reporting of crime against women. I test for the fact whether higher reporting in the post policy period, translated into a decline in the rate of dowry deaths in Indian districts.

I estimate fixed effect regressions of the form:

$$y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 DP_{it} + \beta_2 ce_{it} + \beta_3 ce_{it} DP_{it} + \beta_4 Z_{it} + \mu_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

In this regression,  $y_{it}$  stands for the rate of dowry related deaths. The variable  $DP_{it}$  is the indicator for post-domestic violence policy period and  $ce_{it}$  is an indicator variable for close elections. The  $\mu_i$ 's are district fixed effects and the vector  $Z_{it}$  stands for other district level controls.

Preliminary analysis suggests that reporting rates have sharply increased in the post-policy period. However, dowry related deaths have declined significantly only in regions that had a close election between a male and female candidate in the last election. This highlights the importance of having female leaders at the local government level. Iyer, Mishra and Topalova (2012) document the fact that women in Indian villages with female council heads were significantly more likely to say that the police solved their case or that they did not have to bribe the police after filing a complaint. Past studies have provided evidence that the success of public policies aimed at curbing intimate partner violence depends both on reporting of violence and the likelihood of prosecution. While the reporting of domestic violence has increased following the adoption of PWDVA, its success seems to have been limited to regions where the police was more likely to act upon a complaint such as regions where there were more female leaders.

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