



Female breadwinning and domestic abuse: Evidence from Australia

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Journal of Population Economics, forthcoming

Key findings

Using data from population-wide surveys covering 2005, 2012 and 2016, we find that:

- women who earn more than their male partners are 33 per cent more likely to experience partner violence than women who less than their male partners; and
- women who earn more than their male partners are 20 per cent more likely to experience partner emotional abuse than women who less than their male partners; and
- there is no impact of female or male breadwinning on men's experience of partner violence or emotional abuse; and
- domestic abuse against women in Australia does not decrease as women's relative income within the couple improves; and
- overall the results suggest a strong role for gender norm violations resulting in greater domestic violence.

What we knew

- There are two main types of theories relating women's relative (to their partner's) income:
 1. As women's relative income increases their bargaining power within the couple increases. This should result in a decrease in violence against women as their relative income increases.
 2. 'Male backlash' or 'gender norm' explanations. These theories suggest that violence against women will increase as their relative economic power within the couple increases.
- The international, empirical literature finds evidence supportive of both theories. Aizer (2010), in a well-cited paper using US data, shows that violence against women among people with no more than high school education decreases as their relative income increases. Using the same approach with Swedish administrative data on hospital admissions, Ericsson (2020) finds evidence of backlash theory. Evidence from Canada and Ecuador appears to support the bargaining mechanism. Evidence from Cambodia, Turkey and Mexico support the gender norm mechanism. [See references in the main paper.]
- It is clear from the literature that both mechanisms exist and they may co-exist. Which one dominates in which country is an empirical question.
- Our paper is the first to address this question in Australia.

What we do

- We use data from the Personal Safety Surveys (PSS) from 2005, 2012 and 2016.
- We combine this with survey data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Survey of Income and Housing (SIH) and the Australian census.

- We show that the relationship between spouse income and female partner abuse is best modelled by a binary variable that captures “female breadwinning.”
- We use reported income and a proxy for expected income based upon the SIH and census data.
- We consider a wide range of alternative explanations for the observed correlation between relative income and partner abuse. These include educational differences, cultural and linguistic differences, age differences .
- A unique aspect of our study is that we examine abuse against men as well as abuse against women.

What we know now

Our results are summarised in Figure 1. When women’s share of couple income is more than one half (when they make more than their male partners), there is a large and statistically significant increase in the probability that they experience domestic violence. On the right-hand side of Figure 1 we see that there is no impact for men. The line is flat. The figures for emotional abuse are similar as are the figures using the predicted income measure instead of reported income.

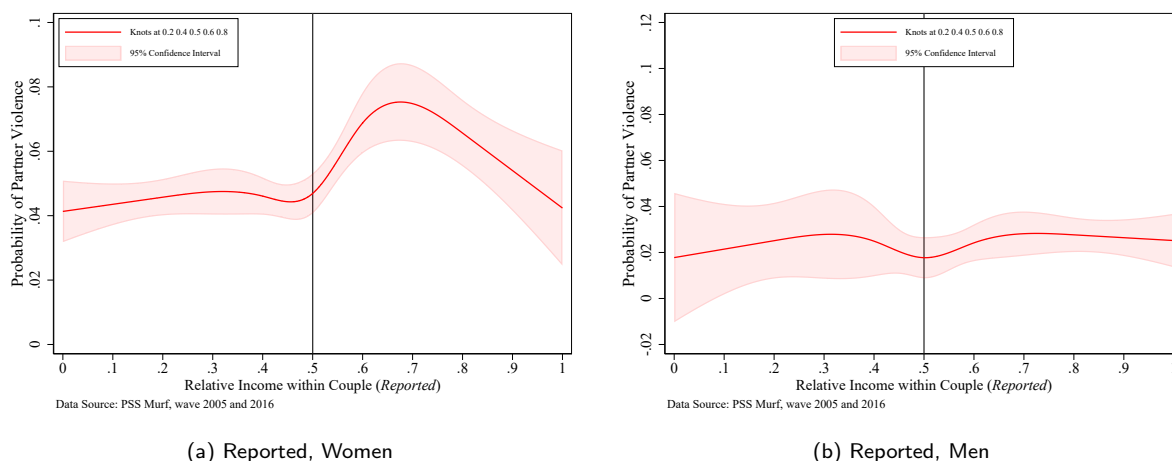


Figure 1: PARTNER VIOLENCE AS A RESTRICTED CUBIC SPLINE OF RELATIVE INCOME BY GENDER
 Note: figure shows the probability of partner violence as a restricted cubic spline of relative income. The knots for the spline are set at 0.2, 0.4, 0.5, 0.6 and 0.8.

- Female breadwinning produces a 33 per cent increase in the probability of experiencing partner violence and a 20 per cent increase in the probability of experiencing emotional abuse; and
- there is no effect for men; and
- these effects are found for both Australian-born and non-Australian born individuals; and
- these effects are found at all income levels and for all educational groups.

What this means for policy

- Women’s economic outcomes are improving. This may not automatically lead to a decrease in partner violence and emotional abuse, as many assume.



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- Governments may need to support cultural change to reduce abuse against women.
 - Policy makers will need to highlight the importance of social norms when advising on the design of child care, parental leave and family payments policy.
 - For domestic violence patterns to change, gender norms will need to evolve alongside growing equality in income.

Where to now?

- Further research is needed on the interaction between domestic violence and aspects of disadvantage, such as reliance on income support. Anecdotal evidence suggests that family violence is a determinant of long-term reliance on income support.
- Australia should continue to gather consistent, population-wide data on domestic abuse and make this data available to researchers to improve our understanding of domestic abuse and evaluate policies to reduce it.

More information

- Get the full working paper at: <https://taxpolicy.crawford.anu.edu.au/publication/ttpi-working-papers/18650/gender-norms-and-domestic-abuse-evidence-australia>
- We would welcome the opportunity to present our research to your team and to discuss potential joint research projects on related or similar topics.
- Contact us at robert.breunig@anu.edu.au or jacquelyn.zhang@anu.edu.au

References

- Aizer, A. (2010). The gender wage gap and domestic violence. *American Economic Review* 100(4), 1847–59.
- Ericsson, S. (2020). Backlash: female economic empowerment and domestic violence. Working Paper 2019:12, Lund University, Department of Economics.