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ABSTRACT

Female Empowerment and Intimate Partner Violence

The chapter reviews the economic literature on intimate partner violence (IPV), a widespread human rights violation affecting nearly one in three women globally and generating significant societal costs. It focuses on the relationship between various dimensions of female empowerment and IPV. The chapter begins by outlining key theoretical frameworks—including household bargaining, instrumental violence, male backlash, and exposure theories—as well as the main data sources used to study IPV. It then reviews empirical evidence on how factors shaping female empowerment at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels influence IPV outcomes. Central themes include labor market dynamics, education, income shocks, family formation, legal frameworks, institutional access, and gender norms. The chapter also considers how these factors interact across levels and discusses additional drivers of IPV not directly linked to female empowerment. The goal is to provide an overview of causal evidence from the economic literature on IPV while emphasizing its complexity and the importance of a context-specific, intersectional approach to both its analysis and prevention.

JEL Classification: J1, J12

Keywords: intimate partner violence

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1. Introduction

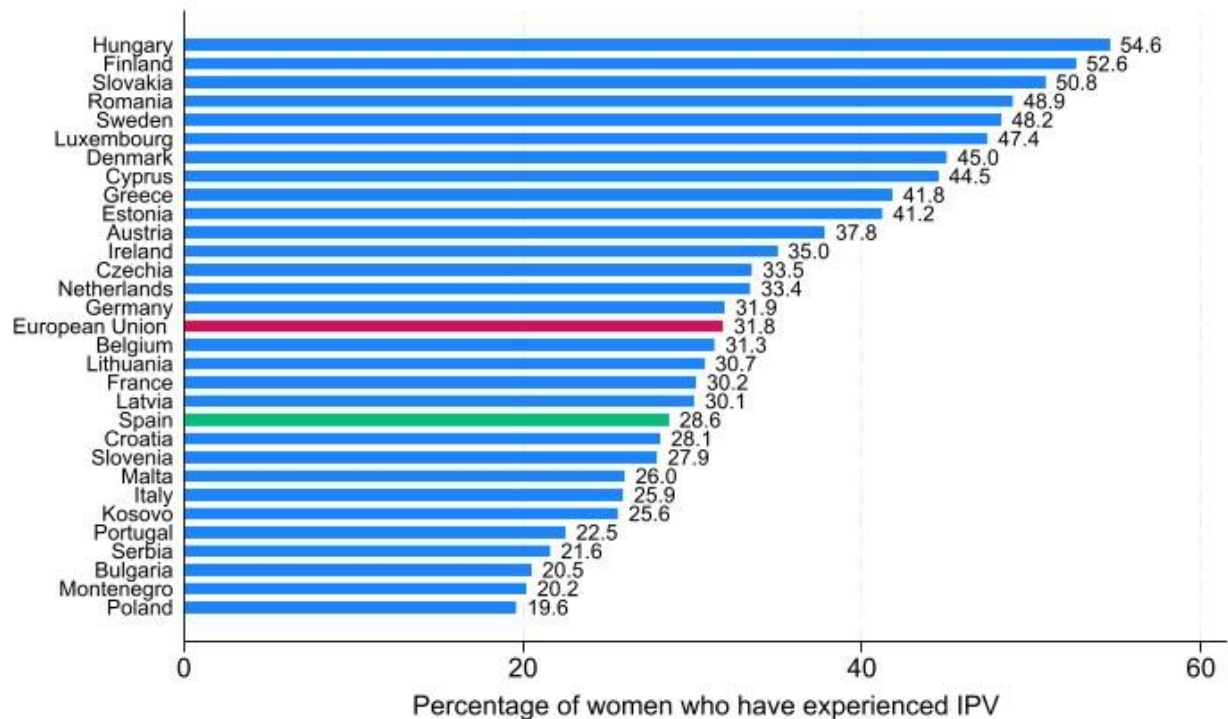
Violence against women (VAW)¹ is a significant public health issue and human rights violation. In 1993, the United Nations adopted the *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, defining VAW as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (Resolution, 1993). Although many years have passed, the issue remains urgent and its elimination is indeed one of the targets of the United Nations’ *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (Resolution, 2015).

VAW encompasses multiple forms, with intimate partner violence (IPV) being the most prevalent (UN Women, 2024). IPV includes physical violence (e.g., slapping, choking), sexual violence (e.g., spousal rape), psychological violence (e.g., intimidation, forced isolation), and economic violence (e.g., withholding financial resources, prohibiting school or work attendance) perpetrated by a current or former partner. Sexual violence, which can occur both within and outside of IPV contexts, involves any harmful or unwanted sexual behavior imposed by any person in any setting, including attempted or completed rape, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, indecent exposure, and unwanted touching. Additional forms of VAW include femicide, human trafficking, harmful practices (e.g., female genital mutilation, forced and child marriage), and technology-facilitated violence. Global surveys conducted from 2000 to 2018 reveal a stark reality: nearly 1 in 3 women aged 15 to 49 have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner, non-partner sexual violence, or both, at some point in their lives (WHO, 2021). IPV is the most prevalent form of violence against women, and this chapter focuses specifically on this type. Among ever-partnered women in this age group, 27% report experiencing physical or sexual IPV at least once in their lifetime, with 13% affected within the past year. Alarming, IPV often begins early: nearly 1 in 4 girls aged 15 to 19 have already been affected. While the rate of recent IPV experiences tends to decrease as women age, IPV remains widespread across age groups and regions, with particularly high rates in less developed areas.

Within the European Union, the picture is similarly concerning. In 2021, 18% of women aged 18 to 74 reported experiencing physical and/or sexual IPV throughout their lives, while 30% reported suffering psychological and/or economic abuse (FRA, EIGE, Eurostat, 2024). The lifetime prevalence of any form of IPV is estimated at 32%, while 5% of European women experienced at least one form of partner violence in the 12 months preceding the survey. However, these figures vary significantly across the EU, with lifetime IPV rates ranging from 19.6% in Poland to 54.6% in Hungary (see Figure 1).

< Figure 1 here >

Figure 1. Ever-partnered women aged 18 to 74 who have experienced violence by an intimate partner over their lifetime in the 27 EU Member States. *Source:* Eurostat (2024)



Beyond being a horrific violation of women’s human rights, VAW has significant and far-reaching consequences for both individuals and society. In particular, IPV often leaves lasting impacts on women’s physical, mental, and reproductive health, contributing to injuries, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and even death (Campbell, 2002; Heise and Garcia-Moreno, 2002). Furthermore, IPV can impair women’s ability to work, maintain stable employment, and sustain earnings, creating further economic setbacks. It also has negative externalities on children, affecting their health, education, and social well-being (Heise and Garcia-Moreno, 2002). These impacts translate to substantial economic costs. Health care, legal and criminal justice services, and productivity losses drive the financial burden of IPV to levels that equate to around 5.2% of global GDP - surpassing the costs associated with civil wars, terrorism, and homicides (Fearon and Hoeffler, 2014). In the U.S., the annual cost of IPV is approximately \$8.3 billion (2003 USD) (Max et al., 2004), with lifetime costs per female victim estimated at \$103,767 (2014 USD) (Peterson et al., 2018). In the European Union, IPV against women incurred an estimated annual cost of €152 billion (EIGE, 2021), higher than the 2021 Spanish expenditures on old age social benefits (Eurostat, 2021). While these figures are calculated using different methodologies and may not be directly comparable, they underscore the extensive economic impact of IPV across contexts.

Sociological research has introduced ecological models to explain violence, highlighting how individual, relationship, community, and societal risk factors interact (Heise and Garcia-Moreno, 2002; WHO, 2010). At the individual level, personal characteristics influence the likelihood of experiencing or perpetrating violence. Risk factors include younger age, lower education levels, witnessing or experiencing violence during

childhood, substance abuse, and attitudes accepting of violence. The relationship level considers dynamics within families, peers, and intimate partners. Here, factors like relationship dissatisfaction, male dominance, economic stress, and educational disparities can elevate IPV risk. Community-level factors center on the contexts of neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, while the societal level involves broader cultural and institutional elements that shape an environment either conducive to or protective against violence. Research links IPV with gender-inequitable norms, poverty, low social and economic status for women, weak IPV legal sanctions, limited women's civil rights and divorce access, armed conflict, and societal acceptance of violence.

Despite extensive evidence on IPV risk factors, much of the existing research lacks causal identification. The relatively new economic literature on the issue fills this gap by providing rigorous causal evidence on how various socioeconomic factors and policies influence VAW and IPV prevalence. Economists have also advanced measurement techniques by integrating diverse data sources, including for instance hospitalization and police records, beyond traditional population surveys. The majority of economic studies concentrate on the causal relationship between various aspects of female empowerment — broadly defined — and IPV. This chapter will outline the primary theories underlying this relationship and analyze empirical evidence on how factors influencing female empowerment at individual, relationship, community, and societal levels affect IPV prevalence. Additionally, it will highlight the interplay of these factors across levels and examine how other elements — not directly tied to female empowerment — may also influence IPV. While the chapter will draw on a broad range of established and recent studies, it will provide a more detailed discussion of the most influential contributions (highlighted in bold and summarized in Table 1 at the end of the chapter). Finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of research implications and directions for future work.

2. Main theories on female empowerment and IPV

The relationship between increases in female empowerment and IPV is complex and multifaceted as it can operate through various channels that may have opposing effects. Studies across disciplines have highlighted these dynamics. This subsection offers a brief overview of key theoretical frameworks, including household bargaining, instrumental violence, male backlash, and exposure reduction models.

Economists have often examined intimate partner violence through the lens of household bargaining models (Aizer, 2010; Farmer and Tiefenthaler, 1997). These models generally assume that each partner's utility depends on factors such as consumption and violence. In this framework, the utility of (some) men increases with violence², whereas women's utility decreases. The household negotiates on the allocation of resources and the level of violence, where violence is “compensated” through transfers. The resulting outcomes - both in terms of resource distribution and IPV level - are shaped by each partner's relative bargaining power, which depends on their threat point. The threat point reflects the level of welfare a partner can achieve outside the relationship (e.g., his/her earning potential and external support if he/she were to leave the relationship). A higher threat point translates to greater bargaining power, enabling a partner to negotiate outcomes that better

align with his or her preferences. If the woman cannot credibly leave the relationship because, for instance, she is economically dependent on the partner or her access to divorce is limited, her bargaining power would be low, and the equilibrium level of violence would be higher. Therefore, according to these models, female empowerment – such as through improved employment opportunities and strengthened legal rights - enhances women's outside options and reduces IPV.

An alternative economic theory conceptualizes violence not as directly increasing men's utility but as a strategic instrument used to control intra-household decision-making and/or extract resources from their partner (Bloch and Rao, 2002; Bobonis et al., 2013; Eswaran and Malhotra, 2011). In this view, men may not “enjoy” committing violence, but they may employ it - or threaten to do so - as a means to strengthen their bargaining power. Therefore, in contrast to the previous theory, a higher female threat point may correspond to a higher risk of IPV. Indeed, female socioeconomic empowerment could lead to an increase in IPV as the partner might resort to violence as a tool to (re)assert control over decision-making dynamics or resources. In such scenarios, violence is referred to as “instrumental”.

The third theory originates from sociology and is indicated in economic literature as the “male backlash” theory (Hornung et al., 1981; Macmillan and Gartner, 1999). It posits that IPV may serve as a means for men to reassert traditional masculine identity when socially prescribed gender roles are challenged. Indeed, masculinity has often been constructed in terms of power, authority, and the breadwinner norm, while femininity is associated with dependence and caregiving. When these norms are disrupted - for instance, if the man loses his job while the woman is employed - violence may be used as a tool to reestablish perceived dominance. Thus, similar to the theory of instrumental violence, female empowerment can increase the risk of IPV. However, there is a distinction between the two frameworks: in instrumental violence, IPV is strategically employed often to gain material benefits, while in male backlash, IPV is driven by psychological and social motives, particularly the need to restore a sense of identity tied to traditional gender norms.

The final theory considered in this chapter is the exposure reduction theory, originating from criminology (Dugan et al., 1999). The premise is straightforward: the more time women in abusive relationships spend with their partners, the greater their risk of experiencing violence. Consequently, any factor that decreases the amount of time couples spend together could reduce IPV. Within this framework, certain aspects of female empowerment, such as employment, may reduce a woman's exposure to her partner by increasing the time she spends outside the household, thereby lowering the likelihood of violence.

To conclude, the theories discussed offer differing hypotheses regarding the relationship between female empowerment and IPV. Household bargaining models and, in some cases, exposure reduction theories suggest that increased female empowerment reduces IPV, whereas instrumental violence and male backlash theories predict the opposite effect. Ultimately, determining which of these hypotheses - or which combination - holds true is an empirical question.

3. Empirical evidence on female empowerment and IPV

3.1 Main data sources on IPV

Before delving into the empirical evidence on the causal effects of female empowerment on intimate partner violence, it is essential to briefly review the main data sources used in economics to study domestic abuse. Indeed, measuring IPV is inherently challenging due to the sensitivity of the issue, yet data availability is a crucial prerequisite for understanding the phenomenon and informing policymaking. Furthermore, it is important to obtain data representative of the population, rather than relying solely on information from small, high-risk samples. To address these challenges, the economic literature leverages a variety of data sources, including population-based surveys, police or court records, hospital records, femicides, helpline call data, and even Google search trends. This subsection provides an overview of their characteristics.

The most common source of IPV data is *population-based surveys*, which may focus specifically on gender-based violence or include a dedicated module within broader surveys, such as crime ones (Anderberg et al., 2016). These surveys have several advantages: they provide detailed information on a representative population sample and often include extensive demographic and socio-economic data at both individual and household levels. Additionally, surveys are capable of capturing various forms of IPV, such as psychological and economic violence, which are otherwise difficult to detect. However, surveys also come with limitations. They are expensive to conduct, typically have a low frequency, and questionnaires may not be comparable across time or countries. Furthermore, as they rely on the victim's self-reporting, they are susceptible to under-reporting due to stigma or fear and do not usually focus on the perpetrators. Lastly, responses can be influenced by factors such as survey design and the interviewers' characteristics, which may affect the accuracy and consistency of the data collected.

Police or court records are another common source of IPV data, consisting of reported or persecuted cases, systematically collected with high levels of geographical and temporal granularity (Card and Dahl, 2011). This allows for detailed analysis of crime trends and patterns over time and across regions. However, these records also have notable shortcomings. Firstly, their access is often restricted, as this information is highly confidential, or it is only available in aggregated forms, which poses challenges for analysis using standard causal inference techniques. Secondly, the issue of under-reporting may be severe, given that the rate of victims denouncing IPV is generally low and there is a significant level of case attrition between reporting and charging. Moreover, the extent of under-reporting can vary significantly across contexts, influenced by cultural norms and law enforcement and prosecution characteristics. Finally, forms of IPV such as emotional and financial abuse are usually not criminalized and, as a result, generally excluded from these data sources.

Hospital and medical data share several advantages and limitations with police data. These records are often systematically collected and can provide highly disaggregated information. However, this data source only captures cases severe enough to require medical attention, potentially underrepresenting less acute but prevalent forms of IPV. Furthermore, IPV is not always explicitly documented in medical records, as women

may choose not to disclose that their assailant was their partner, and healthcare practitioners may prioritize recording codes related to the primary injuries rather than the context of the accident. Therefore, researchers often rely on proxies, such as female hospitalizations for assault-related injuries, to infer IPV cases, which can help address the self-reporting bias but may not fully capture the broader spectrum of IPV (Aizer, 2010).

Femicides represent another measure of IPV, capturing its most extreme and fatal outcomes. Data on femicides can often be gathered from police records or media reports. In the former case, information is typically limited due to confidentiality constraints, whereas in the latter, the data may occasionally include detailed insights into the circumstances, perpetrators, and victims (Colagrossi et al., 2023). Moreover, demographic death records often include the victim's gender and indicate whether the cause of death was homicide, allowing for the construction of proxies for femicides. However, definitions and reporting standards for femicides can vary widely across contexts, leading to inconsistencies in data collection and comparability. Additionally, because femicides represent only the most severe and visible form of IPV, their frequency tends to be low compared to the broader prevalence of non-lethal violence.

Finally, **helpline calls and Google search trends** offer additional insights into IPV. These sources can capture real-time patterns of interest or concern related to violence, potentially revealing hidden trends that other data sources might miss (Berniell and Facchini, 2021). However, both have limitations in terms of representativeness. Helpline data depends on public awareness of and access to these services, while Google search trends are influenced by internet availability and use. Furthermore, helpline data may lack collection standardization, while, for Google searches, the data's reliability hinges on the choice of keywords, and the results may reflect general interest or public awareness rather than the actual prevalence of IPV.

In summary, each data source for measuring IPV comes with distinct strengths and limitations. The choice of data often depends on the specific context and availability, but every type can play an essential role in understanding IPV. Integrating multiple data sources - when feasible - offers the potential for a more comprehensive and reliable perspective of this complex issue.

3.2 Individual and relationship factors

As noted, the relationship between female empowerment and IPV is highly complex, making its ultimate impact an empirical question. This section highlights key contributions that examine the causal effects of factors influencing female empowerment at individual and relationship levels. These factors include labor market outcomes, income shocks, assets' ownership, education, cohabitation, and motherhood. As you will notice, for the vast majority of these elements, there is evidence supporting either the bargaining and exposure hypotheses or the instrumental violence and backlash ones, consistent with theoretical predictions about the ambiguous impacts of increasing female empowerment at the individual or relationship levels on IPV. This ambiguity is largely context-dependent, with community and societal factors influencing the direction of these relationships, as will be discussed in the subsequent sections of the chapter. Nevertheless, the importance of this section lies in illustrating how economic researchers theorize and empirically analyze these complex

issues, while also emphasizing that there is no single solution to addressing gender-based violence. Instead, a multitude of factors across different levels must be considered to develop effective approaches.

3.2.1 Labor market outcomes

The economic literature examining the causal impact of labor market outcomes - such as employment status and wage levels - on IPV is extensive but yields mixed findings. Aizer's (2010) pioneering study explores the impact of the gender wage gap on female assault-related hospitalizations in California, USA. The paper develops a household bargaining model, suggesting that increasing a woman's potential wage relative to her partner's reduces IPV by strengthening her outside options. To test this prediction, the study constructs sex-specific measures of local prevailing wages based on county-level industrial structures and statewide wage growth in male- and female-dominated industries (Bartik, 1991). The analysis reveals that narrowing the gender wage gap reduces violence against women. Moreover, the author argues that the finding supports the bargaining hypothesis rather than the exposure reduction one since the decreases in violence occur during non-working hours.

Another seminal contribution to the topic is **Anderberg et al.'s (2016)** work theorizing and empirically investigating the effect of unemployment on IPV in England and Wales. Indeed, while some commentators suggest that higher unemployment increases domestic abuse, the authors argue that what is critical is the gendered nature of unemployment. They develop a household bargaining model that includes asymmetric information. In the model, men may or may not possess a violent predisposition, which women can only infer from their behavior. Marriage provides a degree of income risk insurance through consumption sharing, influencing the strategic behavior of the partners. Therefore, men with violent tendencies may strategically conceal their nature to maintain the relationship if they face poor future earnings prospects as their wife is likely to leave them if she discovers their violent nature, making IPV less likely. Conversely, if women face higher unemployment risk, they may be less inclined to leave their partner even if he were to reveal his violent predisposition, increasing the risk of IPV. Thus, the model predicts that higher male unemployment is associated with lower IPV, while higher female unemployment corresponds to higher IPV.

The authors test their model's predictions by combining IPV data from the British Crime Survey with labor market data from the UK's Annual Population Survey, covering the years from 2004 to 2011. The British Crime Survey is a nationally representative annual cross-sectional survey that includes a self-completion module for respondents aged 16 to 59 in England and Wales, capturing experiences of various forms of domestic abuse in the preceding 12 months. The analysis focuses on women and constructs two binary indicators of IPV: physical and non-physical abuse. Moreover, labor market data from the UK's Annual Population Survey, released quarterly and containing 12-month datasets, offer insights into employment conditions at the police force area level. The empirical specification relates a woman's risk of IPV to the male and female unemployment rates in her local area and age group, broadly interpreted as perceived unemployment risk. The model includes controls for individual demographic characteristics and time-varying economic, institutional, and demographic factors at the area level. Moreover, the specification incorporates

time and area fixed effects, accounting for aggregate IPV trends and unobserved time-invariant area characteristics. Finally, the authors employ an instrumental variable approach as a robustness check to mitigate the potential endogeneity of local unemployment rates. They construct the unemployment rate by interacting the initial local industry composition of employment with national industry-specific unemployment trends, following the methodology proposed by Bartik (1991).

The empirical analysis aligns closely with the authors' theoretical predictions. While the overall unemployment rate shows no significant effect on women's risk of IPV, gender-specific unemployment rates reveal contrasting impacts: higher female unemployment increases IPV risk, whereas higher male unemployment reduces it. Specifically, a 1 percentage point rise in female unemployment increases the likelihood of physical IPV by 3%, with male unemployment producing an equally large but opposite effect. The results for non-physical IPV mirror those for physical abuse. These findings support the bargaining hypothesis, emphasizing that policies to enhance women's employment security can play a crucial role in mitigating IPV.

While Aizer's (2010) and Anderberg et al.'s (2016) studies provide evidence supporting the bargaining theory, showing that reducing the gender wage gap and the female relative to male unemployment reduces IPV, other research on labor market outcomes reveals more complex results. In Sweden, Bergvall (2024) finds that increases in women's potential earnings, relative to men's, raise their hospital visits for assaults. Yet, this effect appears primarily driven by a rise in care-seeking for IPV-related injuries rather than by an increase in actual assault, which still aligns with the bargaining hypothesis. On the other hand, Zhang and Breunig (2023) report that women earning more than their partners experience higher levels of IPV in Australia. Similarly, Alonso-Borrego and Carrasco (2017) find that, in Spain, female employment reduces IPV only when the partner is also employed, while male employment consistently reduces IPV, aligning with the male backlash or instrumental hypotheses. In the same country, **Tur-Prats (2021)** further examines how female-to-male relative unemployment influences IPV, emphasizing the role of gender norms shaped by historical family structures across Spanish provinces. The study highlights that areas with the tradition of stem families - where married couples lived with the husband's parents - allowed women to participate more in the labor market by sharing household duties with their mothers-in-law, fostering more flexible gender role norms today. Conversely, provinces historically dominated by nuclear families continue to hold traditional views of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. Exploiting exogenous unemployment measures based on Bartik's (1991) approach and four rounds of a gender-based violence survey, Tur-Prats (2021) finds that lower female unemployment relative to male unemployment increases IPV in historically nuclear-family areas, supporting the male backlash theory, but this effect is neutralized in provinces with a stem-family tradition. This evidence underscores the crucial role of gender norms in mediating the relationship between labor market dynamics and IPV.

Research in low-income countries also shows contrasting findings regarding the impact of improved female labor outcomes: some studies report a reduction in IPV (Bhalotra et al., 2021; Chin, 2012; Perova et al., 2023), others find an increase (Dhanaraj and Mahambare, 2021; Erten and Keskin, 2021, 2024; Guarnieri and Rainer,

2021), while some observe no significant effect (Kotsadam and Villanger, 2022; Lenze and Klasen, 2017; Perova et al., 2021). These divergent results likely stem from differences in data, methodology, and especially, context, with community and societal factors playing a critical role in shaping the relationship. Indeed, the previous discussion highlights how the effect of female-to-male relative labor outcomes on IPV may depend on prevailing gender norms (Tur-Prats, 2021). Along a similar perspective, Bhalotra et al. (2021) reveal the relevance of divorce accessibility in defining the direction of the results. Indeed, analyzing 31 developing countries, the authors find that male unemployment is associated with an increase in physical abuse, while female unemployment corresponds to a decrease, consistent with the backlash or instrumental violence theories. However, these patterns are entirely driven by countries where women face social or legal barriers to divorce. In contexts with unrestricted access to divorce, the relationship reverses, aligning instead with the bargaining hypothesis. These contributions underscore the interplay of factors at different ecological framework levels and the importance of designing context-sensitive policies that not only improve female labor market outcomes but also mitigate potential unintended consequences on IPV risk driven by community and societal elements, ensuring that labor improvements translate into real female empowerment.

3.2.2 Income shocks and assets

Income shocks. Income shocks and assets are also critical factors influencing female empowerment at individual and relationship levels. Unlike traditional labor market outcomes, these elements are not assumed to impact IPV through possible changes in exposure. However, the bargaining, instrumental, and backlash channels may still play a role. Studies typically investigate the relationship between income shocks and IPV by examining programs that provide conditional or unconditional cash transfers, often explicitly directed to women, a common intervention in low-income countries. Overall, these studies generally support the bargaining hypothesis, finding that such income shocks reduce IPV, potentially through enhanced bargaining power and alleviation of household financial stress (Haushofer et al., 2019; Hidrobo et al., 2016; Peterman et al., 2022). However, Bobonis et al. (2013) present an exception: their study on a conditional cash transfer program in Mexico finds that, while physical violence decreased, emotional abuse - including threats of physical IPV - increased, suggesting that the instrumental violence hypothesis, in the form of psychological violence, may also play a role in this context. Moreover, examining a different policy within the same country, Bellés-Obrero et al. (2025) find that the expansion of a non-contributory pension program led to an increase in IPV against older women, driven by the instrumental use of violence and, potentially, by greater exposure resulting from reduced labor market participation.

Further illustrating the interplay between individual- and societal-level factors, evidence from Mexico shows that the impact of cash transfers to low-income women depends on prevailing gender norms and access to divorce. Angelucci (2008) finds that the program's effect on IPV varies with the size of the transfer and the husband's cultural background, proxied by educational attainment and spousal age gap. Specifically, small transfers reduce IPV, while larger transfers increase IPV in households where men hold more traditional gender norms. Expanding on these dynamics, Bobonis et al. (2020) show that the program's IPV-reducing effects are

concentrated in states that had implemented early legal reforms easing divorce access for victims of violence. These findings underscore how improvements in women's economic status may have divergent effects depending on broader social and institutional contexts.

Evidence on income shocks on IPV from high-income countries mainly focuses on policies aiming at increasing low-income female workers' earnings and, generally, finds support for the bargaining hypothesis. A recent study by Cesur et al. (2025) shows that the 1994 to 1998 expansion of the Federal earned-income-tax-credit (EITC), which significantly increased after-tax income for low- to moderate-income families with children in the US, reduced IPV among women with less than a four-year college degree, with the effect being stronger for unmarried women and unmarried black women. The authors present suggestive evidence that the reduction in violence is driven by an increase in discretionary income and EITC's benefits of promoting work. In contrast, Rebollo-Sanz and Rodríguez-Planas (2025) find that a 2019 22% minimum wage increase in Spain was associated with a 40% increase in psychological abuse because the reform led to a substitution in employment among partners, away from the secondary earner, traditionally the wife. These authors also find that for women whose partner is five year older, the increase in violence is not accompanied with lower female labor-market engagement, providing evidence of alternative mechanisms, such as instrumental use of violence.

Asset ownership. Asset ownership may also affect women's economic empowerment, and thus potentially their risk of experiencing IPV, though the economic literature on this topic is relatively limited. A pioneering study by Panda and Agarwal (2005) finds that women's ownership of housing or land in Kerala, India, is associated with a lower risk of physical and psychological IPV. Similarly, Oduro et al. (2015) observe that a higher female share of the couple's wealth is negatively associated with emotional abuse in Ghana and physical abuse in Ecuador. However, the opposite is true if the woman owns a much greater share of the couple's wealth than that of her partner. Further research is needed to robustly identify the causal effect of women's asset ownership on IPV as the existing evidence is descriptive. However, for both income shocks and assets, the findings generally indicate that economic empowerment can enhance women's bargaining power. Nonetheless, as with labor market outcomes, careful attention is required to mitigate potential backlash and the instrumental use of violence, considering, among others, the influence of community and societal-level elements.

3.2.3 Education

While many had identified a negative or negligible association between female education and IPV (Heise and Garcia-Moreno, 2002; WHO, 2010), causality between education and IPV was not established until the seminal work by **Erten and Keskin (2018)**. The authors explore the conceptual relationship between female education and IPV, proposing three key channels through which education may influence IPV: gender attitudes, labor market outcomes, and assortative mating. Firstly, increased education may alter women's gender attitudes, fostering less tolerance for domestic violence and greater awareness of its manifestations, thereby reducing the prevalence of IPV. Secondly, heightened education may improve women's labor market outcomes. As previously explained, these can decrease the risk of experiencing IPV by augmenting women's outside options

and bargaining power, as well as minimizing exposure to the potential perpetrator. However, employed women may also face increased IPV due to the instrumental use of violence or male backlash. Thirdly, assortative mating in the marriage market may allow more educated women to secure “better” partners. These “better” partners may be less prone to violence because they have more gender-equality beliefs or because they are in positions – for instance, more or better employed – for which the risk of exerting IPV due to male backlash or instrumental use of violence is reduced.

To empirically investigate the question and its underlying mechanisms, Erten and Keskin (2018) leverage a 1998 policy change in Turkey that increased compulsory schooling from five to eight years for those who entered junior high school the following year. They utilize data from the 2008 wave of the National Survey of Domestic Violence against Women, which interviewed women aged 15 to 59 and contained rich information on the respondents' and households' socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, including birth month and year and questions on physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence by the intimate partner. Using the compulsory schooling change, the authors apply a regression discontinuity (RD) design to compare individuals born right before and after January 1987, which marked the eligibility cutoff for the reform³. The RD design assumes that the younger group would have behaved as the older group in the absence of the educational reform. Erten and Keskin's (2018) analysis focuses on women who had ever been in a relationship.

After showing that the reform increased female schooling in rural areas, with no effects on male schooling, the authors find that the educational reform increased male-to-female psychological and economic abuse. The authors rule out changes in women's gender attitudes (reducing concerns that the results might reflect changes in IPV reporting rates rather than prevalence) or assortative matching as potential mechanisms. Instead, they find evidence of an improvement in women's labor market outcomes, which they argue is consistent with instrumental theories of violence.

Erten and Keskin's (2018) study inspired other analyses exploring a similar question but generally finding results in sharp contrast with the instrumental-violence hypothesis. Specifically, Akyol and Kırdar (2022) utilize the same reform and expand the analysis to include also the 2014 wave. These authors find evidence that more compulsory education reduced physical violence against rural Turkish women with assortative matching being the driving mechanism. The two studies also differ in their definition of rural versus urban childhood location, and female employment, as well as in their methodological approach with Akyol and Kırdar (2022) using a reduced form analysis, and Erten and Keskin (2018) estimating a two-stage-least-squares model. Moving to a different country, Peru, Weitzman (2018) finds that more education improves female empowerment through better occupations and delayed motherhood and reduces both recent and lifetime physical, sexual, and psychological IPV. They also find evidence of assortative mating, with women matching to higher educated partners. Similar results are found in China by Zhou et al. (2021). Indeed, the authors observe a negative impact of female education on physical and sexual IPV with the driving mechanisms being assortative mating, improved income, and especially changes in women's attitudes towards traditional gender roles.

3.2.4 Family formation and motherhood

Cohabitation. The final elements influencing female empowerment at individual and relationship levels explored in this chapter pertain to family formation, specifically cohabitation and motherhood. Regarding cohabitation, the recent work by **Adams-Prassl et al. (2024)** provides a thorough analysis of the dynamics of abusive relationships. Shifting the perspective from much of the existing literature, which primarily examines the impact of changes in women's economic conditions on IPV, this study investigates how cohabitation with an abusive partner affects women's economic outcomes, emphasizing the systematic role of economic abuse.

Going into more detail, Adams-Prassl et al. (2024) leverage comprehensive administrative data from Finland to examine male-to-female IPV. Their dataset links all filed police reports with detailed labor market outcomes and demographic information from 2006 to 2019. The analysis focuses on couples who began cohabiting between 2006 and 2014, with both partners aged 21 to 65. Using a matched difference-in-difference design, the study explores the economic effects of entering cohabitation with a partner who is later reported for physical IPV. Specifically, it compares the outcomes of victims to those of observationally similar women - matched on pre-treatment demographic and economic characteristics - who started cohabitating in the same year with comparable partners but never reported physical abuse during their relationships.

The analysis reveals that cohabiting with an abusive partner significantly harms women's employment and earning outcomes. It reduces their likelihood of employment by 6.7 percentage points and decreases their annual earnings by €1,600, on average, for at least five years. These findings are not attributable to external labor market or firm-level shocks, changes in fertility, or differences in gender norms. Additionally, the study identifies that these negative effects are non-monotonic relative to women's pre-cohabitation outside options. Women with "intermediate" levels of earnings or education prior to cohabitation experience the largest economic setbacks compared to those with the lowest or highest levels of education or earnings. Furthermore, it is specifically cohabitation with an abusive partner—not relationships in general—that drives the deterioration in women's labor outcomes. This conclusion is drawn by employing a triple difference-in-differences design, comparing the economic outcomes of victims relative to their matched controls across abusive and non-abusive relationships. In addition, the analysis reveals that men reported for physical IPV suppress the outcomes of all their partners. Notably, men who are violent toward a non-cohabiting woman—but not toward a man—also negatively affect the economic outcomes of their cohabiting partner. This finding suggests the existence of an “abusive” type of man: individuals who are ever violent toward women who consistently suppress their partners' labor outcomes.

Finally, Adams-Prassl et al. (2024) propose a dynamic theoretical model to rationalize their findings and derive policy implications. The model considers two types of men: abusers, who derive utility from violence, and non-abusers. Women begin with imperfect information about their partner's type but gradually learn it through their behavior—physical abuse offers perfect revelation, whereas economic abuse provides weaker signals. In the second period, women decide whether to remain with their partner. The model's predictions align with the observed non-monotonic relationship between women's pre-cohabitation outside options and economic abuse.

Specifically, abusive men may strategically refrain from physical violence in the initial period to prevent their partner from leaving, while simultaneously undermining her economic independence. This allows them to reveal their abusive nature in the later period with a reduced risk of the partner leaving. For women with low pre-cohabitation outside options, leaving is unlikely regardless of further economic suppression, as their dependency is already high. Conversely, women with high outside options are more likely to leave, and the resource cost of suppressing their labor supply is greater. As a result, abusive men have the strongest incentive to strategically suppress the economic outcomes of women with intermediate outside options, increasing the likelihood of them staying in the relationship before the man's type is fully revealed in the second period. Moreover, the model underscores that the strength of the strategic motivation for economic abuse depends on how sensitive the likelihood of a breakup is to changes in women's outside options. The authors demonstrate that improvements in women's labor market outcomes reduce IPV. However, this reduction is not solely attributable to shifts in within-relationship bargaining power, as suggested by Aizer (2010), but is significantly linked to an increased probability of the couple breaking up. Furthermore, women are more likely to leave abusive relationships when the availability of shelters or social workers in the local area rises, whereas no such effect is observed for non-abusive couples. These findings emphasize the critical role of the breakup channel and community-level support in the relationship between women's empowerment and IPV.

Motherhood. Ample evidence has analyzed the relationship between motherhood and IPV. Most of this evidence is descriptive and finds that IPV increases with the arrival of children. However, many of these studies use a small sample of women recruited from hospitals, police stations, family counseling, or shelters (Graham-Bermann and Edleson, 2001), hence the results pertain to women with a high risk of victimization or who have already been victimized. Until very recently, population-based studies did not estimate the causal impact of having a first child on IPV. Using different identification strategies and datasets, four studies are currently tackling this empirical question in four different countries (the United States, Sweden, Brazil, and Mexico), as discussed below.

The arrival of the child is likely to influence intrahousehold dynamics. For women, having a child may limit their ability to leave the relationship, reducing their bargaining power, and increase time spent with their partner, potentially heightening IPV prevalence. At the same time, motherhood might make women less tolerant of violence, empowering them to leave abusive partners. On the father's side, becoming a parent may increase the risk of exerting IPV due to stress associated with parenting. Alternatively, the arrival of the child may reduce violent behavior as the responsibilities of becoming a father may curb engagement in substance abuse, which is associated with higher abuse. Adding to the complexity for researchers, the reporting of partner violence—whether in surveys or to the police or health professionals during hospital visits—often changes with the arrival of a first child. Mothers (to be) may withhold information due to a stronger emotional bond with the father or increased financial dependence on him, especially as the arrival of a newborn might lead to reduced employment or complete withdrawal from the labor market. Under-reporting of violence may also increase with motherhood if the fear of retaliation rises with the arrival of the child or if she fears that reporting

violence may endanger custody of her child. Alternatively, women's willingness to denounce partner violence may increase if their acceptance of violence falls with the arrival of the child, especially among those women who have decided to leave their partner, as reporting may increase their negotiating power when leaving.

Indeed, Massenkoff and Rose (2024) and Britto et al. (2024) find that motherhood increases IPV reporting. Specifically, Massenkoff and Rose (2024) observe that the patterns of IPV arrest of fathers align with divorce timing in Washington state. Similarly, Britto et al. (2024) discover that women in Brazil are more likely to report violence to the police after pregnancy and childbirth. Finally, a recent study using 16 years of administrative individual-panel data on hospitalizations in Sweden (Bergvall and Rodríguez-Planas 2024) identifies two distinct patterns in IPV reporting. First, pregnant women and recent mothers tend to report IPV, particularly in the period leading to a relationship ending—consistent with Massenkoff and Rose (2024) and Britto et al. (2024). At the same time, the authors observe a *decline* in hospitalizations for suspected IPV among women who are less likely to explicitly label their experiences as partner violence, especially in cases involving less severe incidents. This pattern suggests that some mothers-to-be and young mothers may avoid seeking hospital care altogether to avoid triggering formal IPV reporting by hospital staff.

Moving beyond reporting incentives, Massenkoff and Rose (2024) and Britto et al. (2024) suggest that the positive effect of motherhood on IPV they observe in Washington state and Brazil stems not only from increased reporting but also from a rise in prevalence. Specifically, alongside arrest records, Britto et al. (2024) leverage data from a system of mandatory notifications filed by Brazilian health units when IPV is known or suspected. Importantly, because these notifications are not automatically shared with judicial authorities and are submitted by third parties, they mitigate concerns about under-reporting due to fear of retaliation. Indeed, they serve as a proxy for the likelihood of women experiencing aggression and are found to increase after pregnancy and childbirth. Moreover, Deschamps (2024) provides evidence from Mexico suggesting that motherhood increases IPV due to mothers' reduced ability to leave a violent partner. This decreased likelihood of mothers exiting abusive relationships, compared to non-mothers, may result from changes in labor market participation, the unequal costs of child-rearing, and/or psychological factors that reinforce relationship commitment after becoming a mother. Additionally, the author dismisses changes in male partners' violent behavior, such as stress-induced aggression, as a significant contributing factor. Supporting this perspective, Muratori (2025) finds that reduced access to abortion services in Texas leads to an increase in IPV, attributing the effect to diminished bargaining power and fewer options for women to leave relationships following unintended pregnancies.

3.3 Community and societal factors

The economic literature on factors influencing female empowerment at the individual and relationship levels shows mixed effects on IPV, consistent with theoretical predictions. The direction of these relationships varies significantly by context, as community and societal factors can either promote or prevent violence. This section examines how family law; criminal law, procedure and prosecution; institutional representation; and gender norms affect IPV. Research indicates that unilateral divorce laws, domestic violence criminalization,

warrantless arrest policies, no-drop prosecution, increased female representation in law enforcement and politics, and specialized courts generally improve reporting rates and/or reduce IPV incidents. The analysis emphasizes the importance of integrated victim support services and highlights how gender norms both mediate policy effectiveness and directly influence IPV prevalence.

3.3.1 Family law

The literature identifies women's access to divorce as crucial for female empowerment at community and societal levels. Bargaining models suggest IPV levels are negatively correlated with a woman's threat point—the utility she can achieve outside her relationship. Restricted divorce access undermines a woman's credibility to leave, lowering her threat point and potentially increasing violence. However, violence may also serve as a tool to prevent separation or emerge from social stigma surrounding divorce. Additionally, divorce accessibility mediates the effects of other socioeconomic factors and female empowerment policies, as demonstrated previously (Bhalotra et al., 2021; Bobonis et al., 2020).

Stevenson and Wolfers (2006) were pioneers in theorizing and empirically examining the direct impact of expanded access to divorce on IPV. Specifically, they analyzed whether the legalization of unilateral divorce—divorce without the other spouse's consent or proof of fault—impacted domestic violence, suicides, and intimate partner homicides in the United States. The authors highlight that this reform primarily benefits individuals who most wish to leave a marriage, plausibly those in abusive relationships. Unilateral divorce could influence such relationships through two main mechanisms. First, it provides a straightforward legal avenue for ending the marriage without needing to establish evidence of abuse in court. Second, it shifts bargaining power within intact relationships towards the spouse desiring to exit the marriage—typically the abused partner—by empowering them to credibly threaten to leave, which may reduce the level of violence they face. Indeed, the authors hypothesize that before this policy change, abusive relationships were more likely to terminate in extreme outcomes such as suicide or homicide.

To examine the question, Stevenson and Wolfers (2006) leverage the staggered implementation of unilateral divorce laws across U.S. states during the 1970s and 1980s alongside data from multiple sources. Information on IPV is sourced from the Family Violence Surveys conducted in 1976 and 1985. Data on suicides come from the National Center for Health Statistics, which provides a census of death certificates that include the cause of death, as well as demographic details. Lastly, homicide data is obtained from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, which offers incident-level details on homicides, including the victim-offender relationship, as reported by participating police agencies. The first dataset is analyzed through a Difference-in-Difference (DiD) model, including a binary variable equal to 1 if the state has adopted unilateral divorce before the second round of the survey and 0 otherwise, and state and year fixed effects. Suicide and homicide data are instead analyzed through both DiD and event-study designs, allowing in the latter case to investigate the effects' dynamics up to 20 years later and at the same time to check whether treated and control states were following parallel trends before the law implementation.

The study finds that the legalization of unilateral divorce in the United States led to significant reductions in domestic violence rates initiated by both men and women, with a decline of approximately 30 percent. Additionally, expanded access to divorce decreased female suicide rates by 8–16 percent, with the most substantial reductions observed in the long term and among women aged 25 to 65. Male suicide rates, instead, were unaffected. The analysis also provided suggestive evidence of a roughly 10 percent decline in the number of females murdered by their intimate partners, with no corresponding changes in male homicide rates. The authors argue that these effects are only partially attributable to the first hypothesized channel—the exit from abusive relationships—as the timing of the effects did not align with changes in divorce rates. Instead, the redistribution of bargaining power within ongoing marriages likely played a significant role in reducing violence, underscoring the potential of divorce laws to influence outcomes within households.

Other studies conducted in various contexts also find that increasing access to divorce reduces IPV. Brassiolo (2016) analyzed the effect of Spain's 2005 legalization of unilateral divorce by comparing married couples, who were affected by the reform, to cohabiting couples, who were not. Using a DiD estimation and three rounds of gender-violence survey data, the study revealed that IPV decreased by approximately 31 percent among married couples relative to unmarried ones. The decline in IPV was observed among couples who remained married, aligning with the hypothesis that expanded divorce access redistributes bargaining power within relationships. The reduction was more pronounced among women without young children, likely because custody decisions tied to young children complicate the feasibility or credibility of exiting a relationship. Furthermore, the impact varied with women's outside options: it was greatest for women with medium levels of education. Indeed, women with low outside options could not fully leverage easier divorce access, while those with high outside options already had strong threat points prior to the reform. Similarly, Corradini and Buccione (2023) analyzed the impact of Egypt's 2000 legalization of unilateral divorce for women by comparing mothers of children younger than the custody age cutoff—who were more likely to retain custody—with mothers of older children, for whom divorce would result in the loss of custody, alimony, and housing rights. They found that the policy reduced IPV for the former group relative to the latter, consistent with predictions from bargaining models.

The only contrasting evidence comes from Mexico, where García-Ramos (2021) investigates the staggered legalization of unilateral divorce across states. The study finds no short-term effects but observes a long-term increase in physical, economic, and emotional IPV, particularly among women who remain married. Indeed, the author underscores that, beyond potentially increasing bargaining power and abusive couple dissolutions, easier access to divorce might also escalate violence as an instrument to prevent separation or as a backlash against deviations from gender norms. The author's analysis rules out the backlash channel, as the reform did not influence women's labor force participation or attitudes toward abuse, but supports the instrumental use of violence. In fact, the rise in IPV is most pronounced among women with at least primary education, who have sufficient outside options to threaten to leave their partners credibly. This paper highlights that, while facilitating divorce access generally reduces IPV, this effect may reverse in certain contexts, suggesting that

other factors, such as prosecution and enforcement policies, access to institutions, and gender norms, may play a role in shaping this relationship, as we will now discuss.

3.3.2 *Criminal law, criminal procedure, and criminal prosecution*

A crucial factor affecting female empowerment and IPV prevalence is the set of policies governing how law enforcement responds to domestic violence and its prosecution. As societal perceptions of domestic violence shifted from viewing it as a private matter to recognizing it as a criminal offense, policies evolved accordingly. This transformation led to the adoption of more proactive measures, including laws that criminalize IPV, allow warrantless arrests for domestic violence incidents, and mandate no-drop prosecution policies, among others.

IPV criminalization. The first significant step in this direction is the criminalization of IPV itself. Beleche (2019) finds that incorporating domestic violence into the Penal Codes of Mexican states reduces female suicide rates, a result driven by decreased physical and sexual IPV through increased bargaining power for women. Similarly, broader gender policies, including the criminalization of domestic violence, have been shown to reduce IPV in Colombia (Durevall, 2023) and to enhance women's welfare in China (Gu et al., 2022). However, recent evidence from Pakistan and Rwanda suggests that the effectiveness of these laws may be contingent on social norms. Specifically, they may fail to deter violence in communities where attitudes toward domestic violence and divorce remain conservative (Gulesci et al., 2024; Sanin, 2024).

Arrest laws. Once IPV is recognized as a crime, a second critical aspect concerns the police's response, specifically arrest laws. Arrests - and the policies that increase their likelihood - can have ambiguous effects on IPV and revictimization because they influence both the victim's and the offender's behaviors in potentially opposing ways (Amaral et al., 2023). For victims, the heightened certainty of arrest might deter reporting due to emotional attachment to the perpetrator or, conversely, empower them to report incidents more frequently. For offenders, these reforms could escalate IPV as a retaliatory backlash or reduce it through the deterrent effect of potential arrest and prosecution. A notable reform in this area is the allowance for warrantless arrests of alleged perpetrators based on probable cause of domestic violence. In the United States, these laws range from discretionary to preferred to mandatory arrest policies, varying in the level of discretion granted to the officers. Chin and Cunningham (2019) analyze the causal effects of implementing these three types of policies on intimate partner homicides. Their findings indicate that discretionary arrest laws effectively reduce homicides involving current and former spouses, while preferred and mandatory arrest policies show no significant impact on these extreme outcomes. Notably, the inconclusive effect of mandatory arrest laws on intimate partner homicides contradicts earlier research by Iyengar (2009), which suggested these laws increased homicides by deterring victim reporting. Chin and Cunningham demonstrate that these earlier conclusions stemmed from incorrect reform classifications and data coding errors, highlighting the importance of replication studies in policy-relevant areas. Finally, Amaral et al. (2023) provide compelling evidence from West Midlands, England, demonstrating that on-the-spot arrests of domestic violence suspects reduce repeat IPV emergency calls within the following year. Importantly, this result stems from actual reductions in abuse

rather than changes in victim's reporting behavior. The impact operates through two mechanisms: providing an immediate cooling-off period and creating a longer-term deterrence effect. These findings highlight that proactive arrest policies can effectively break the IPV cycle and enhance victim safety, particularly in countries with historically low arrest rates.

Prosecution policies. The final elements considered in this subsection are the pressing of criminal charges and prosecution policies. Recent research by Black et al. (2023) demonstrates that pressing charges against perpetrators of domestic abuse in England significantly reduces the likelihood of violent recidivism. Additionally, **Aizer and Dal Bò (2009)** examined the theoretical and empirical effects of the no-drop policy, which requires the prosecution of IPV cases to continue even if the victim later seeks to withdraw the charges. The authors highlight the cyclical nature of abusive relationships, where victims often reconsider leaving or reporting their abusers due to emotional attachment, economic dependency, external pressure, or fear. These dynamics challenge traditional models of decision-making, which assume stable preferences. Instead, they propose a framework recognizing that victims' preferences may change over time: the costs of the relationship may be clear immediately following abuse, but emotional attachment to the partner may re-emerge over time. To address this time inconsistency, the authors argue that victims, aware of their shifting preferences, might seek mechanisms to commit to decisions their future selves might abandon. The no-drop policy serves as such a commitment device, ensuring that legal action moves forward regardless of a victim's subsequent change of mind.

In the authors' theoretical model, there are two periods. In the first period, the man decides whether to be violent. If he chooses violence, the woman faces three options: she can kill him, do nothing, or report him to the authorities. Reporting may bring benefits, such as police intervention to scare or remove the perpetrator, but it also carries costs, including potential retaliation or stigma. However, these costs are less severe than those associated with killing the perpetrator. If the woman chooses to report him, in the second period she must decide whether to keep the charges or drop them and return to the partner. Without no-drop policies, the woman will always drop the charges in the second period. This occurs because continuing with legal proceedings is costly, while the costs of the first period's abuse have already dissipated. Importantly, the model assumes that the woman anticipates that she will drop the charges in the future as she is aware of her time-inconsistent preferences. The model makes three key predictions. First, the introduction of a no-drop policy reduces the likelihood of the abusive man being killed. Indeed, without the policy, killing the perpetrator is the only viable commitment device for the woman to permanently end the relationship, especially if she assigns a very low value to her future life with him. In this case, killing becomes preferable to remaining in a violent relationship. The no-drop policy offers a less costly alternative for committing to end the relationship. Second, the no-drop policy's impact on violence reporting depends on the woman's time-inconsistent preferences. When time inconsistency is large—where a woman significantly devalues her relationship immediately after violence occurs, but this negative assessment diminishes later—the no-drop policy may increase reporting by functioning as a commitment device less extreme than homicide. Conversely, when time inconsistency is

minimal and reporting already provides immediate benefits, the policy might reduce reporting rates, as women seeking temporary intervention may be reluctant to commit to the mandatory prosecution required by no-drop policies. Finally, the policy has an ambiguous effect on violence levels. The man's decision to be violent depends on his anticipation of the woman's response. Violence might increase if the policy reduces the most extreme consequence (homicide) and lowers reporting in cases of minimal time inconsistency. Conversely, violence could decrease if the policy enhances reporting and prosecution rates, creating a stronger deterrent effect.

Aizer and Dal Bò (2009) empirically test their model's predictions by analyzing the effects of no-drop policies on IPV prevalence and reporting across the seven largest counties in California between 1990 and 2000. These policies were adopted at different times across counties. Reporting behavior is assessed through the number of men arrested for domestic violence and 911 calls for IPV, while violence prevalence is proxied by the number of women hospitalized for assault. Using negative binomial regressions with county fixed effects, linear time trends, and additional controls, the authors find no significant effects of no-drop policies on the prevalence of IPV. However, reporting significantly increases, as evidenced by a 14% rise in 911 calls and a 23% increase in arrests in counties implementing the reform. To further explore the policy's impact, the authors analyze data on intimate partner homicides from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports for 49 large U.S. cities from 1976 to 1996. The estimates reveal that no-drop policies reduce intimate partner homicides of males by 23%, while no significant effect is observed on female ones. These findings align with the model's predictions, indicating that no-drop policies enhance IPV reporting and reduce male intimate partner homicides but do not significantly alter the prevalence of domestic violence against women. The study underscores the relevance of time-inconsistent preferences in explaining the cyclical nature of domestic violence and the value of commitment mechanisms in shaping the outcomes of public policies on the issue.

3.3.3 *Access to institutions*

Women's access to institutions—including police, the justice system, healthcare, victim support organizations, and political representation—represents another critical factor influencing female empowerment at community and societal levels, potentially affecting both IPV prevalence and reporting rates.

Law enforcement. Improving women's access to law enforcement can be achieved by increasing female representation within police departments and establishing specialized police stations dedicated to addressing crimes against women and staffed predominantly by female officers. Evidence suggests that such measures may raise reporting and/or reduce the prevalence of IPV across various contexts. Miller and Segal (2019) show that the integration of women into U.S. police departments during the 1970s to 1990s increased reporting rates of violent crimes against women and reduced domestic violence escalation, as indicated by lower probabilities of revictimization and decreased femicides. In the case of women's police stations (WPSs), Amaral et al. (2021) find that these institutions persistently increase the reporting of crimes against women, particularly domestic violence, in Indian cities, though no significant effects are observed on IPV prevalence. Nevertheless,

WPSs contribute to women's empowerment and perceived safety, as shown by the positive impact on female employment. However, contrasting results emerge from Haryana, a conservative state in India, where Jassal (2020) finds that WPSs do not increase overall reporting of violence against women. Instead, cases are redirected from standard stations to WPSs, which in this state often encourage reconciliation with perpetrators rather than pursuing prosecution. Further evidence suggests that WPS effectiveness depends on contextual factors. Perova and Reynolds (2017) find that while Brazilian WPSs do not significantly reduce female homicides overall, they substantially decrease homicides among urban and younger women. This selective impact likely stems from more progressive social norms within these demographic groups and potentially fewer economic constraints, again highlighting how gender norms mediate policy effectiveness.

Specialized courts. Another key policy facilitating institutional access is the establishment of specialized IPV courts, as analyzed by García-Hombrados et al. (2024). These courts can influence IPV reporting by shortening judicial processes and providing specific supportive resources—such as social workers and childcare—that reduce the burden of legal proceedings. They may also decrease IPV prevalence by enhancing women's bargaining power through facilitated reporting and potentially deterring violence escalation through timely judicial intervention. Examining specialized courts across Spain (2005-2018), García-Hombrados et al. (2024) employ difference-in-difference methodology using judicial system data, gender-based violence surveys, and administrative records. Their findings reveal that IPV courts increase reporting by approximately 28%, primarily driven by increased reporting of less severe offenses. This effect likely stems from both shorter trial durations and additional resources available in these courts. However, the study finds no conclusive evidence of an impact on IPV homicides, possibly because such effects might only manifest over longer timeframes.

Golestani et al. (2024) take a slightly different approach by examining the impact of randomly assigning specialized IPV courts (versus traditional courts) in Davidson County, Tennessee, on misdemeanor domestic violence cases involving defendants who had not posted bond. Their findings suggest that court specialization may reduce both punishment and crime. Defendants randomly assigned to specialized courts are more likely to proceed to trial and less likely to be convicted than those in traditional courts. Although this may seem counterintuitive, the results are seen as positive: specialized courts can exploit judicial expertise to avoid unnecessary convictions and incarceration, which can exacerbate recidivism for minor offenses. Importantly, the study finds no increase in recidivism or weakening of the criminal justice system's deterrent effect as a result of these more lenient outcomes. In fact, defendants processed in specialized courts are no more likely to be re-arrested or charged in the future than their counterparts in traditional courts. Additionally, victims associated with cases handled by specialized courts are less likely to suffer subsequent IPV incidents and are inclined to cooperate with law enforcement if future incidents occur.

Healthcare. Access to healthcare is crucial for the detection of IPV, as victims may feel more comfortable disclosing violence to healthcare professionals, who are typically required to report any sign of potential abuse to the authorities. Bellés-Obrero et al. (2024) analyze the effects of a 2012 Spanish reform that restricted access to the public healthcare system for undocumented migrants. Their findings show that the reform reduced IPV

reporting and applications for protection orders among foreign women relative to Spanish women, particularly in regions with stricter law enforcement. Importantly, the reform did not affect the actual incidence of IPV but rather its reporting, as evidenced by a decline in injury reports from medical centers, thereby underscoring the critical role of healthcare access in IPV detection.

Victim support organizations. Furthermore, in recent years, there has been a rise in integrated institutions offering comprehensive support to IPV victims. For example, Women's Justice Centers (WJCs) in Peru provide police, legal, and medical services within a single location, simplifying the entire complaint process. Sviatschi and Trako (2021) show that the establishment of WJCs significantly reduces physical and emotional violence, lowers female mortality due to aggression, and decreases hospitalizations for mental health issues among nearby women. These outcomes are driven by increased reporting and a subsequent decline in violence. WJCs improve women's access to and representation within the justice system and law enforcement, while their integrated service model contributes to higher prosecution rates. As a result, WJCs serve as a credible deterrent to potential abusers, offering valuable evidence of the effectiveness of service integration in addressing IPV.

Politics. Finally, female political representation plays a crucial role in expanding women's access to justice institutions and intersects meaningfully with family law, criminal law, and criminal procedure and prosecution. Increased female presence in legislative and executive roles can shape policy agendas that prioritize issues like gender-based violence, legal protection for victims, and enforcement of family and criminal law provisions. Female leaders may also serve as catalysts for cultural change, challenging traditional gender norms and encouraging greater public trust in legal systems. These shifts can lead to both increased reporting and a reduction in the incidence of gender-based violence. For instance, Iyer et al. (2012) find that greater female representation in Indian local governments significantly raises reporting rates for crimes against women (not the incidence), with local council participation having a stronger effect than executive leadership roles. Complementing this, Bochenkova et al. (2023) show that female mayors in Brazil reduce the rate of violence against women, suggesting that executive leadership can also be effective. In the Italian context, Denti and Faggian (2023) find that greater female representation in local councils reduces intimate partner homicides, although they observe no significant effect from female mayors. Notably, they caution that the positive effects of representation may diminish over time when driven by gender quotas, possibly due to backlash in communities where patriarchal norms remain entrenched. These findings underscore the importance of gender diversity not only in shaping substantive legal outcomes but also in enhancing the implementation and perceived legitimacy of family and criminal justice systems.

3.3.4 Gender norms

The final factor influencing female empowerment at both the community and societal levels is gender norms. As referenced throughout the chapter, these norms mediate the effects of various elements and interventions, including women's unemployment (Tur-Prats, 2021), cash transfer programs (Angelucci, 2008), and criminal justice policies (Gulesci et al., 2024; Jassal, 2020; Perova and Reynolds, 2017; Sanin, 2024), among others. In addition to this mediating role, entrenched gender norms can directly influence the prevalence of IPV by

shaping attitudes toward gender roles and acceptable behavior. However, because gender norms are deeply embedded within broader social, cultural, and institutional frameworks, identifying their causal effects poses methodological challenges. To address this, researchers have employed strategies such as exploiting historical variations in female empowerment or examining differences in gender norms across immigrants' countries of origin.

A seminal contribution in this area is Alesina et al. (2021) study, which explores the link between pre-colonial customs and contemporary violence against women in Africa. Their findings reveal that ancestral traits tied to women's economic roles, marriage practices, and post-marital living arrangements have enduring effects on both the prevalence and acceptance of IPV. Specifically, violence is more common among ethnic groups where women historically had limited participation in production, such as societies relying on plough agriculture or male-dominated activities like fishing and herding, which reinforced male bargaining power and breadwinner norm. Additionally, IPV is more prevalent and socially acceptable in societies where marriages were endogamous (within the same ethnic group), reflecting less exposure to progressive ideas, and where couples resided in the husband's village, limiting women's bargaining power and protection from their familial networks. Their study offers compelling insights into the origins and persistence of gender norms conducive to IPV in the African continent.

Tur-Prats (2019) provides further evidence of the enduring influence of historical family structures on contemporary IPV prevalence in Spain. The study examines how traditional family types shaped women's roles in the labor market, with implications for gender norms and violence. Spain historically featured two predominant family models: stem families, where the oldest male child remained in the parental home after marriage, fostering multigenerational households, and nuclear families, where all children left the parental home. The hypothesis is that cohabitation with a mother-in-law in stem families reduced wives' domestic workload, enabling greater participation in productive labor. Using medieval inheritance laws as an instrumental variable, Tur-Prats (2019) finds that provinces historically characterized by stem families exhibit lower IPV rates and more egalitarian gender attitudes today. These findings further illustrate the persistence of cultural norms across generations and their lasting impact on gender-related outcomes.

The final study in this subsection expands the analysis to a pan-European level and exploits variation in gender equality in the country of origin of first- and second-generation female immigrants living in different European countries. Because these women live under the same legal and institutional conditions in their host countries, any variation in IPV prevalence can be attributed to differences in cultural norms inherited from their countries of origin. Given the high degree of marital homogamy in this population, a woman's country of origin effectively serves as a proxy for both her own and her partner's cultural background. González and Rodríguez-Planas (2020) use survey data on gender-based violence from 28 European countries and find that women from less gender-equal societies are significantly more likely to experience IPV in their host countries. This evidence underscores the significant role of inherited gender norms even when formal legal frameworks are uniform.

4. Empirical evidence on other elements affecting IPV

Thus far, the chapter has focused on how various factors influencing female empowerment across multiple levels of the ecological framework affect IPV. However, domestic abuse can also be shaped by other elements not directly linked to empowerment. This section briefly examines seemingly unrelated influences such as football, armed conflict, media exposure, and natural disasters. The goal is to demonstrate that these diverse elements—many of which are especially relevant in current policy and public discourse—can also impact IPV. They may do so by reinforcing or disrupting mechanisms already discussed, or by introducing entirely new pathways, thereby offering a broader and more nuanced understanding of the drivers of domestic abuse.

In the theoretical section, we explored how IPV can be interpreted either as instrumental—used to gain material benefits or assert control over a partner—or as expressive providing utility to (some) men. One variation of expressive violence frames it as an unintentional response to emotional triggers, such as losing control⁴. **Card and Dahl (2011)** investigate this dynamic by examining how emotional cues from football game outcomes affect IPV in the United States. They hypothesize that when the local team unexpectedly loses a game it was favored to win, the resulting emotional shock can lead to an increase in violence. Using domestic abuse reports from the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) and data from Sunday games involving six National Football League teams, they assess expected outcomes based on Las Vegas betting spreads. Assuming that actual game outcomes are random conditionally on the betting spread, they estimate a Poisson model, controlling for local TV audience size. Their results show that unexpected losses lead to a 10% increase in male-to-female violence at home, while no significant effects are found for close losses or unexpected wins. These findings highlight the role of reference points and asymmetry in emotional responses to outcomes. The effect is most pronounced in the time window immediately following the game and in higher-stakes matches, underlying the impact of negative emotional shocks on IPV. However, the influence of reference points is not consistently supported across studies. Ivandić et al. (2024), analyzing data from Greater Manchester in the United Kingdom, find that domestic abuse incidents decline during football matches but rise afterward—particularly when the perpetrator has consumed alcohol. In contrast with Card and Dahl (2011), they observe no significant effect from unexpected outcomes, suggesting that alcohol consumption, rather than emotional cues from game results, may be the primary driver of post-game IPV. Nonetheless, the authors do not dismiss the possibility that emotional triggers may lead to increased alcohol use, which in turn contributes to violent behavior.

The second factor not directly linked to female empowerment but hypothesized to influence IPV is armed conflict, which can affect domestic abuse through multiple pathways—most often leading to an increase in prevalence. First, conflict may normalize violence, increasing the social acceptability of IPV among both perpetrators and victims. This dynamic has been observed in Peru, where regions heavily affected by civil conflict reported higher tolerance for domestic violence (Gutierrez and Gallegos, 2016). Second, direct exposure to combat can lead to post-traumatic stress and emotional trauma, which may trigger violent behavior or lead to increased substance abuse—both of which are strongly associated with IPV—as shown among U.S.

military personnel (Cesur and Sabia, 2016). Third, armed conflict often skews the sex ratio due to higher male mortality, which can distort local marriage markets. In Rwanda, for example, the post-genocide sex imbalance increased the bargaining power of surviving men, resulting in higher IPV rates among women who married after the conflict compared to those who married beforehand (La Mattina, 2017). Fourth, conflict can also reshape female employment patterns—either increasing women’s labor force participation to compensate for lost household income or reducing it in an effort to reinforce traditional gender roles—producing mixed effects on IPV (Hossain et al., 2024). Finally, military deployments can create general exposure effects, with IPV tending to decline while partners are away and rising again upon their return, reflecting the disruptive emotional and relational impacts of deployment cycles.

Thirdly, media-related factors, such as TV access, IPV news coverage, and online social movements, can influence attitudes and behaviors around violence against women. Jensen and Oster (2009) examine the impact of cable television in rural India, arguing that TV exposure informs viewers of alternative lifestyles where women are more empowered. They find that cable TV introduction reduces the acceptability of IPV and increases women’s autonomy. Turning to news coverage, Colagrossi et al. (2023) analyze how femicide news in Italy affects help-seeking behavior among IPV survivors. While the effect can be ambiguous—raising both the perceived risk of staying silent and fear of retaliation—the study shows a spike in reporting in the province and week following the event, especially in cases of broad media coverage. Expanding on this, Cerqua et al. (2024) find that highly prominent femicide news can increase help-seeking nationally. Lastly, social media movements like #MeToo have also driven behavioral shifts, with evidence linking the movement to higher reporting rates of sexual crimes in the USA and OECD countries (Gauthier, 2022; Levy and Mattsson, 2023).

Lastly, natural hazards, including rainfall shocks, earthquakes, extreme temperatures, and the Covid-19 pandemic, can also influence IPV. Rainfall shocks may impact domestic violence by reducing household income, altering women’s employment opportunities, and increasing time spent together. Studies show that droughts - though not floods - raise IPV rates in rural Tanzania (Abiona and Foureaux Koppensteiner, 2018), India (Sekhri and Storeygard, 2014), and Peru (Díaz and Saldarriaga, 2023), primarily due to income loss and poverty-related stress. In Peru, reduced female employment also contributes to this effect. Similarly, Silverio-Murillo et al. (2024) document that earthquakes in Mexico increased crimes against women, while Santonja et al. (2025) and Pavanello and Zappalà (2024) find that extreme heat raises IPV in Spain and the United States, respectively. The mechanism appears to operate through greater exposure and heightened psychological stress, particularly in economically vulnerable areas (Santonja et al., 2025). Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly the lockdowns imposed by governments to curb its spread, had complex effects on IPV. Stay-at-home orders increased partners' exposure and stress, potentially leading to higher abuse. However, these orders also reduced access to alcohol, which could have mitigated violence. Moreover, the pandemic disrupted labor conditions, with the well-documented ambiguous effects of employment changes on IPV. In addition to the incidence, the pandemic may have also affected reporting. Restrictions on mobility and social interactions likely made reporting to police or helplines more difficult, while increased media attention to domestic violence

may have encouraged more women to come forward. Research on Covid-19's impact on IPV shows mixed findings depending on the context, methodology, and data source (see Piquero et al., 2021, for a review). While some studies report no significant effect or even a decrease in violence against women (Hoehn-Velasco et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2022), the majority of evidence suggests that Covid-19 increased IPV, primarily driven by a combination of heightened exposure and pandemic-induced job losses (Arenas-Arroyo et al., 2021; Bhalotra et al., 2024; Henke and Hsu, 2022; Hsu and Henke, 2021).

5. Concluding remarks

Intimate partner violence remains the most prevalent form of violence against women worldwide, affecting nearly one in three women globally and imposing significant societal costs. Understanding the complex and sometimes counterintuitive relationship between female empowerment and IPV is essential for both researchers and policymakers. Theories such as intrahousehold bargaining suggest that increased empowerment reduces IPV, while others—including instrumental violence and male backlash theories—suggest it can provoke retaliation. This chapter has reviewed empirical evidence from the economic literature on how various factors influencing female empowerment—at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels—shape IPV outcomes. Key themes include labor market dynamics, education, income shocks, family formation, family and criminal law, institutional access, and gender norms. One of the central challenges in this field lies in IPV's complexity. Contradictory findings across studies underscore the importance of context and the interplay of multiple elements within the broader ecological framework. While female empowerment often reduces IPV, it can have unintended effects in settings where women lack access to divorce (legally or socially), encounter weak legal enforcement, or have limited institutional support. Gender norms consistently emerge as a powerful mediating factor, influencing both the effectiveness of policy interventions and directly the prevalence of IPV. Table 1 summarizes the main results from the key contributions to the literature. These findings have critical policy implications. They highlight the need to not only promote female empowerment across multiple dimensions but also directly confront conservative gender norms that sustain violence. The chapter also draws attention to the significant impact of seemingly unrelated factors—such as football, conflict, media exposure, and natural disasters—on IPV, demonstrating the need for broad, multifaceted lens. Importantly, there is no one-size-fits-all solution; effective strategies must be sensitive to local context and responsive to the layered realities that women face. The success of IPV-reduction policies depends heavily on cultural and social adaptability. While global frameworks and laws provide important direction, local norms, traditions, and institutions shape how policies are implemented and received. A deeper understanding of the specific cultural context in which IPV occurs is essential for tailoring interventions and creating sustainable change. Tailoring interventions to local contexts—by engaging community leaders, civil society, and grassroots organizations—is crucial for sustainable change. Moreover, applying an **intersectional lens** is essential to capture how IPV risk and response vary across race, class, migration status, and other axes

of identity. Recognizing and addressing these differences can enhance both the relevance and equity of interventions.

Focusing on in the Spanish context, the evidence spans multiple dimensions. At the individual level, the effects of female employment vary depending on the partner's status (Alonso-Borrego and Carrasco, 2017) and prevailing gender norms (Tur-Prats, 2021). At the institutional level, unilateral divorce reduced IPV among married couples by strengthening women's outside options (Brassiolo, 2016), specialized IPV courts boosted reporting (García-Hombrados et al., 2024), whereas restricting migrant women's access to public healthcare lowered it (Bellés-Obrero et al., 2024). A recent 22% minimum wage increase was associated with a 40% increase in psychological abuse because the reform led to a substitution in employment among partners, away from the secondary earner, traditionally the wife (Rebollo-Sanz and Rodríguez-Planas, 2025), underscoring the importance of analyzing how such reforms impact individuals' behaviors in different dimensions. Gender norms remain central, with IPV increasing in nuclear-family regions but being reduced in areas shaped by stem-family traditions (Tur-Prats, 2019). Finally, external shocks—such as extreme heat (Santonja et al., 2025) and the Covid-19 lockdown and downturn (Arenas-Arroyo et al., 2021)—further heightened IPV.

Beyond the inherent complexity of IPV, another constraint in advancing both policy and research is the lack of reliable, comparable data. Administrative data—from police, courts, hospitals, and homicide records—are typically available in aggregate form and tend to capture only the most severe cases of violence. While surveys can reveal a wider spectrum of abuse, they are often infrequent and not easily comparable across contexts. Differentiating between reporting and actual incidence remains a persistent challenge. Addressing this gap requires investment in regular, high-quality, and comparable data collection efforts, as well as greater access to administrative data under strict confidentiality protections. Without such data, it is difficult to identify trends, evaluate policy, or design effective interventions.

As this chapter shows, the economic literature on IPV is rapidly expanding, offering increasingly nuanced insights. Still, much remains to be explored. Promising directions for future research include analyzing the interactions among various risk factors, evaluating the impact of integrated service delivery models, and adopting interdisciplinary approaches that draw on psychology, sociology, law, and public health. In addition, growing attention to other forms of violence against women—such as conflict-related sexual violence (Guarnieri and Tur-Prats, 2023), sexual harassment in public spaces (Amaral et al., *forthcoming*), and workplace violence (Adams-Prassl et al., 2024) —provides valuable research directions and lessons. While these forms of violence differ in context and mechanisms, they are deeply interrelated and essential for shaping a more comprehensive research and policy agenda to end all forms of gender-based violence.

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Table 1. Overview of key contributions to the economic literature on IPV.

Authors, title, journal	Main results
Adams, A., Huttunen, K., Nix, E., Zhang, N. (2024). The Dynamics of Abusive Relationships. The Quarterly Journal of Economics.	Cohabiting with an (eventually) abusive partner negatively impacts women's earnings and employment, particularly for those with intermediate levels of outside options prior to cohabitation. Moreover, men who engage in any form of violence against women impose economic costs on all their female partners, including those who do not report physical violence. The findings suggest the systematic use of economic abuse to undermine women's outside options. (Finland)
Aizer, A., Dal Bo, P. (2009). Love, hate and murder: Commitment devices in violent relationships. Journal of Public Economics.	The adoption of no-drop policies does not affect IPV prevalence, but increases IPV reporting and decreases intimate partner homicides of males, highlighting the importance of commitment devices in breaking the cyclical nature of domestic violence. (California/USA)
Anderberg, D., Rainer, H., Wadsworth, J., Wilson, T. (2016). Unemployment and domestic violence: Theory and evidence. The Economic Journal.	The overall unemployment rate has no significant effect on women's risk of IPV. However, gender-specific unemployment rates have contrasting impacts: higher female unemployment increases domestic abuse, while higher male unemployment reduces it, supporting the bargaining hypothesis. (England and Wales)
Card, D., Dahl, G. B. (2011). Family violence and football: The effect of unexpected emotional cues on violent behavior. The Quarterly Journal of Economics.	Upset losses of local football teams increase IPV, while close-game losses and upset wins show no effect. The impact is short-term and more pronounced for higher-stakes matches, highlighting the role of negative unexpected emotional cues in driving IPV. (USA)
Erten, B., Keskin, P. (2018). For better or for worse?: Education and the prevalence of domestic violence in Turkey. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics.	Increased female education in rural areas raises psychological and economic IPV. The effect is not driven by changes in partner characteristics or women's attitudes towards violence but rather by improvements in women's labor market outcomes, consistent with the instrumental and backlash hypotheses. (Turkey)
Stevenson, B., Wolfers, J. (2006). Bargaining in the shadow of the law: Divorce laws and family distress. The Quarterly Journal of Economics.	Unilateral divorce legalization reduces domestic violence initiated by both men and women, as well as female suicides and intimate partner femicides. These reductions are attributed to both the breakup and bargaining channels. (USA)
Tur-Prats, A. (2021). Unemployment and Intimate Partner Violence: A Cultural Approach. Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization.	In territories with a nuclear-family tradition (characterized by more conservative gender norms), a decrease in female unemployment relative to male unemployment increases IPV due to backlash. Conversely, these effects are offset in provinces historically dominated by stem-family structures, highlighting the role of gender norms in mediating the relationship between labor market outcomes and IPV. (Spain)

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¹ The chapter focuses on gender-based violence perpetrated by men against women, which represents the most widespread form of gender-based violence.

² According to these models, violence can be seen as an expressive behavior that provides positive utility to (some) men. Another perspective on violence as expressive behavior suggests it may occur unintentionally, arising from arguments that escalate out of control or in response to unexpected negative emotional cues (Card and Dahl, 2011). This latter interpretation, however, is not explored in this section as it is not directly related to the relationship between female empowerment and IPV. Evidence regarding its relevance will be addressed later in the chapter.

³ Indeed, junior high school in Turkey begins at the age of 12.

⁴ Both intrahousehold bargaining and loss-of-control models can be viewed as theories of expressive violence, but they differ significantly (Card and Dahl, 2011). Bargaining theories suggest that IPV is balanced by compensatory transfers to the woman, creating an "optimal level" of abuse and consumption, which reduces the incentive to seek police intervention. In contrast, loss-of-control models do not involve any such compensation and consider protective behaviors. Additionally, male backlash theory may encompass both instrumental and expressive elements. On one hand, it can be used as a tool to reassert traditional male dominance; on the other, it may stem from deviations from conservative gender norms.