

The paradox of empowerment: gender norms and intimate partner violence in PNG

by Alexander Smith

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a global scourge, with nearly [one in three women](#) experiencing violence at the hands of a partner at least once in their lifetime. Rates of violence are particularly high in PNG, where the prevalence rate is one in two women.

How do we change this? It is tempting to think that improving the disparity in resources or economic status between women and their partners would be an effective mechanism to reduce financial dependence and improve women's ability to leave violent relationships.

This logic is known as the household bargaining theory. It proposes that individuals choose partners based on a bargained set of economic and non-economic transfers. The idea is that greater economic status reduces a woman's dependence on her current partner, such that a man's ability to be violent without consequence decreases. And there's plenty of evidence for increased economic status leading to reduced violence from both [developing](#) and [developed countries](#).

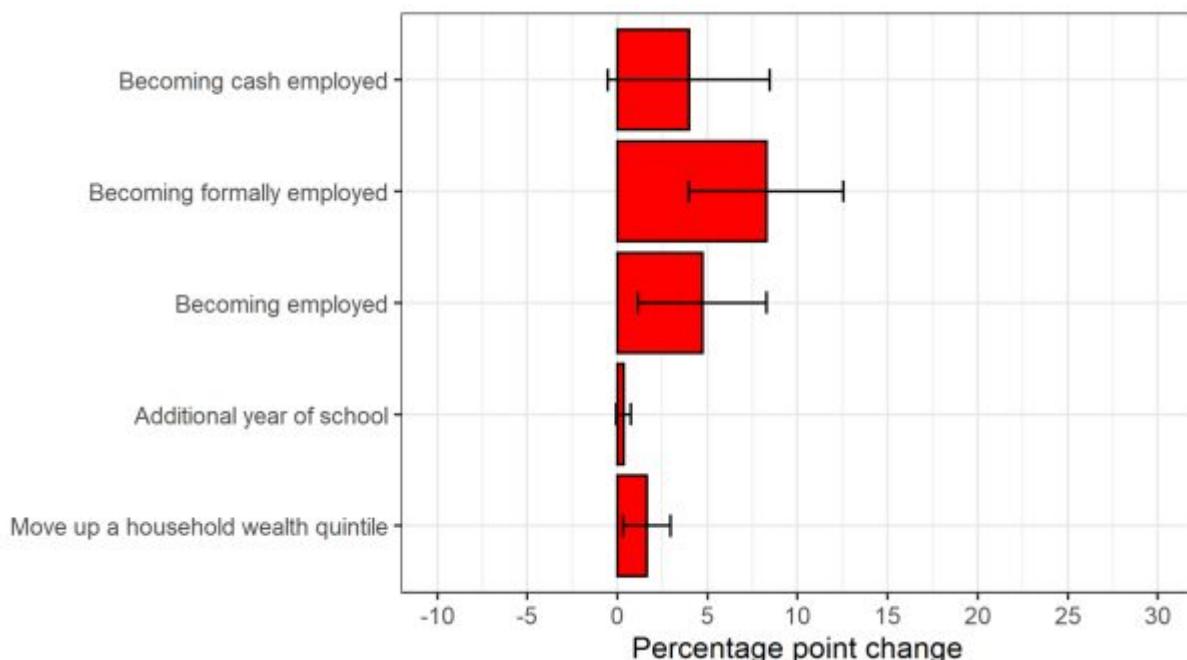
An alternative theory, called the gender norms or male backlash theory, proposes that men respond to women who they perceive as undermining their status by employing violence to reassert control. There's also evidence for this theory from [developing](#) and [developed countries](#).

But what is the case in PNG? There's strong [qualitative evidence](#) pointing to the relevance of gender norms for intimate partner violence in PNG, with roughly similar shares of men and women, around 70%, reporting that it is "justifiable" for a man to beat his female partner. My [Development Policy Centre discussion paper](#) is the first to test this relationship in PNG, using the [2016 Demographic and Health Survey](#) (DHS). I find clear evidence for the gender norms theory — in particular, women who report earning more cash than their partner experience 17% higher rates of violence than women who do not.

The top research in this field in other parts of the world draws on administrative panel data, or panel data that track changes in outcomes following cash transfer schemes. While the DHS is comprehensive in its coverage of health issues, it does not collect income data. I use a range of other measures of economic status, including education and employment, to measure the association between improvements in status and the prevalence of recent intimate partner physical violence (in the last 12 months).

Figure 1 displays the results of my tests of the household bargaining theory (the “whiskers” represent 95% confidence intervals). Assuming a linear relationship, and estimated separately, employed women, more highly educated women and women from wealthier households experience higher levels of violence than women not employed, less educated and from less wealthy households. This is the opposite of what is hypothesised by the household bargaining theory.

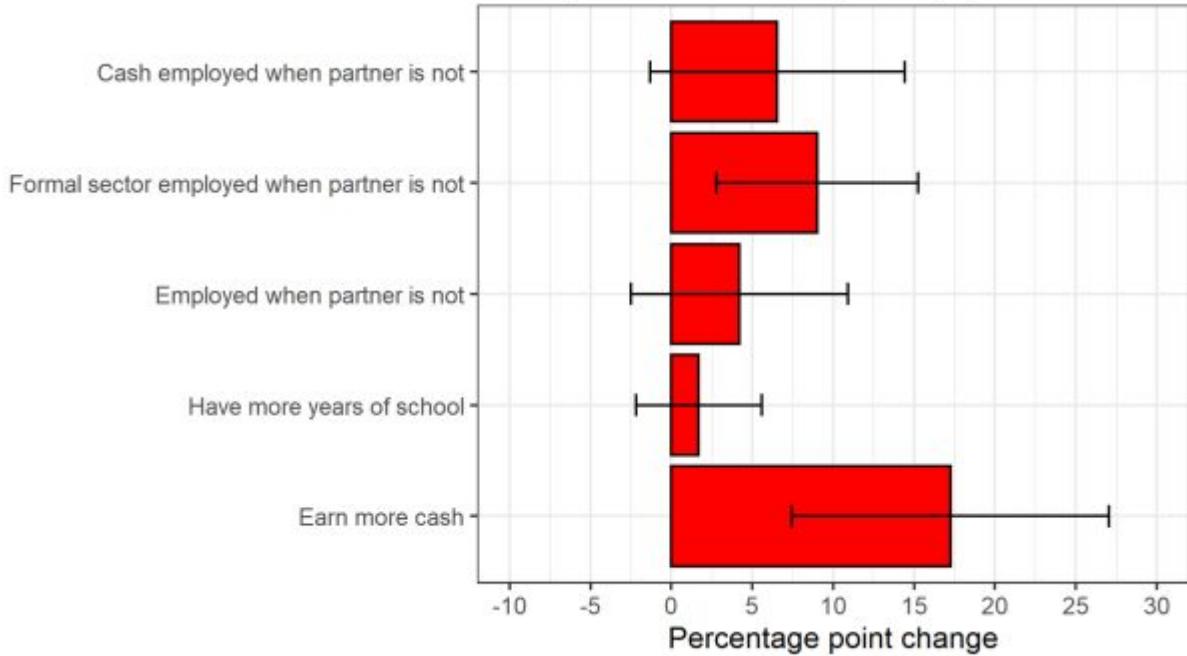
Figure 1: Association between improvement in status and experience of IPV



Source: 2016 PNG Demographic and Health Survey.

Figure 2 displays the results of the associated change from breaking norms (for example, a woman’s being employed when her partner is not). These models focus on *relative* differences in status between a woman and her partner, rather than absolute levels of status. The strongest effect occurs when women report that they earn more cash than their male partner – these women experience 17% higher rates of violence than women who do not.

Figure 2: Association between breaking norms and experience of IPV



Source: 2016 PNG Demographic and Health Survey.

A problem with drawing conclusions from correlation studies is the difficulty in removing the effect of confounding variables (variables that affect the outcome but are unobserved) or endogeneity (where the outcome variable affects the independent variable). Nevertheless, my conclusions stand up well against alternative explanations of the result.

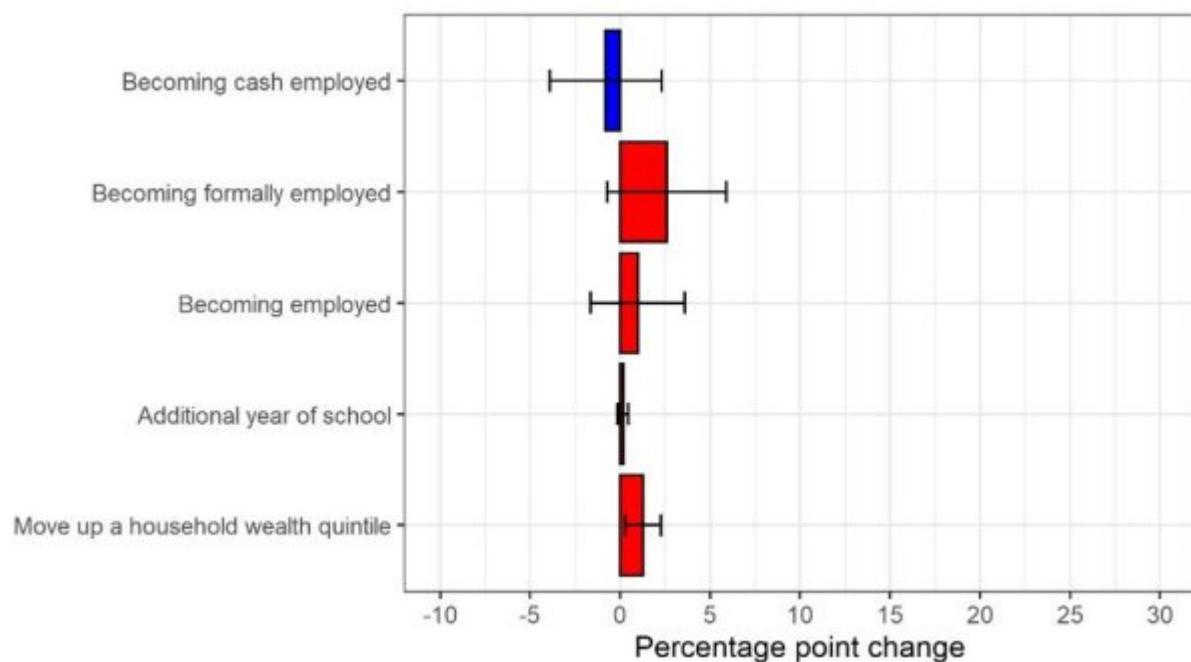
One alternative explanation is the ‘dud partner’ theory — that violent men are more likely to have poor employment prospects, thus forcing women to earn more than their partner. As you might expect, women who earn more cash than their partners also break other norms on education and employment. In addition, norm-breaking women are older, more urban, more educated and more employed than norm-observing women. Similarly, the *partners* of norm-breaking women are also older, more urban, more educated and more employed than the *partners* of norm-observing women. And norm-breaking households are wealthier than norm-observing households. So norm-breaking couples appear to have much stronger than average employment prospects, indicating that norm-breaking likely isn’t a function of the ‘dud partner’.

Another explanation points to the role of reporting bias. While there’s a strong consensus in the literature that IPV is almost always underreported, the extent of underreporting with respect to status is less clear. **Some studies** have shown that more highly educated women are more likely to underreport due to the stigma attached to violence. **Other studies** have looked at a range of other possible channels of reporting bias — fear of reprisal, a desire to protect the offender, and age and cultural background. These channels may be simultaneously present and

cancel each other out to some extent.

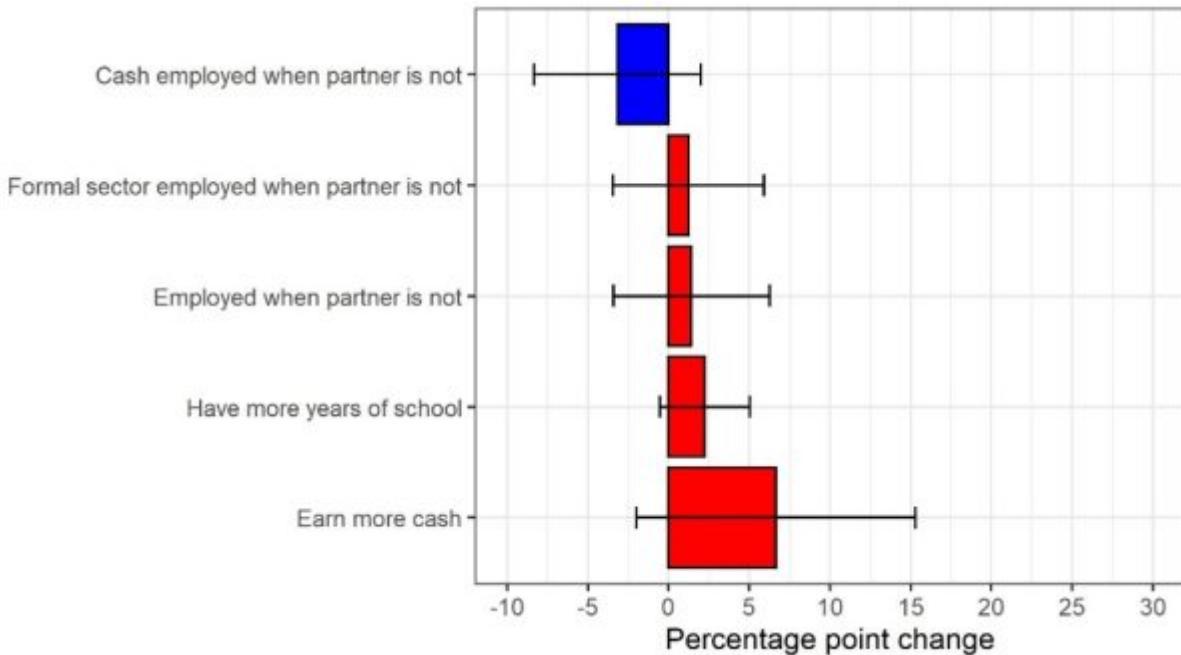
Another further explanation is that conflictual households are more likely to be norm-breaking. To assess this, Figures 3 and 4 test whether increases in female status affected the rates of violence experienced by men. By contrast with the baseline models, here there are no statistically significant relationships under either the household bargaining or gender norms models — clear evidence that the increase in violence associated with breaking norms isn't a household-level experience, but rather almost exclusively experienced by women.

Figure 3: Association between improvement in status and experience of IPV



Source: 2016 PNG Demographic and Health Survey.

Figure 4: Association between breaking norms and experience of IPV



Source: 2016 PNG Demographic and Health Survey.

This research doesn't seek to explain the drivers of violence – “norm-observing” women in PNG still experience amongst the highest rates of IPV globally. But it highlights the importance of considering norms when designing public policy interventions bearing on female economic power in PNG.

Read the [full discussion paper](#).

Disclosures:

This blog is based on research undertaken for a Masters of International and Development Economics at the Australia National University's Crawford School of Public Policy.

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Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/the-paradox-of-empowerment-gender-norms-and-intimate-partner-violence-in-png-20240222/>