

# DOES PAID WORK PUT WOMEN AT GREATER RISK OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

**Evidence from Jordan shows no causal effect; employment reduces sexual violence**



Daniel Case

## Overview

Enhancing women's labor force participation is an important way to promote women's empowerment and improve their well-being and the well-being of their children. The empirical literature on the relationship between women's employment status and domestic violence has been mixed. Some studies find that employment increases domestic violence while

others find the opposite. The reason for the mixed results is due to methodological limitations, which raises doubt as to whether the identified effects are causal.

## Key Results

- Initial results suggest that women's employment appears to increase domestic violence, especially emotional and physical violence, but these results neglect causality issues;
- When addressing causality issues, there is no significant causal link between women's employment and domestic violence;
- In fact, there is some evidence that women's employment reduces sexual violence;
- Education and wealth may influence the risk and type of domestic violence.

## By

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The Growth to Empowerment (G2E) program within GrOW examines the impact of economic growth on women's economic empowerment.

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## Background

In the Middle East, as few as 28 percent of the workforce is women, and in Jordan, it is a mere 14.9 percent. This underuse of human capital represents a loss at many levels. Studies show that women who have access to economic resources invest in their children's education, nutrition, and health care, and have lower fertility rates. Cross-national and cross-regional studies have also shown that reducing gender gaps in employment can drive economic growth.

Yet there have been long-standing concerns that women's employment may also put them at greater risk of domestic violence. The literature on the relationship between women's employment status and domestic violence is mixed. Study findings have been inconclusive: some point to a "protective" effect, with women's earnings giving them more say in household decisions. Others suggest that women's employment increases spousal violence, by undermining the male "breadwinner" role and challenging their husbands' authority.

Mixed results are due to methodological limitations, which raise doubt as to whether the effects are casual. Our research sought to add to evidence on the effect of women's paid work outside the home on reported domestic violence. This brief shares key findings and lessons on policies that may help reduce domestic violence.

## Methods and Data

To test the hypothesis of whether women's employment affects domestic violence, we performed a regression analysis using a data set of 2,283 married women drawn from the 2007 Jordan Population and Family Health Survey (JPFHS). The questionnaires contain a section on domestic violence and women's empowerment. This survey is the first nationally representative available data set on domestic violence in Jordan. More importantly, this data set allows us to distinguish between different types of abuse, in particular, sexual, emotional, and physical violence.

The analysis includes characteristics of the woman, her husband, and the household, as well as regional components since they all might have an independent effect on domestic violence. The outcome variable is the occurrence of domestic violence, which captures the incidence of emotional, physical, and sexual violence in the household. The main variable of interest is the women's working status. It indicates whether each woman is involved in paid work outside the home as we assume that it has important implications on her bargaining position within the household.

A key concern in study design is the possible endogeneity<sup>1</sup> of women's working status and violence, due to the chance that the causal links are reversed, or that other determining variables are not taken into account. It could be, for example, that domestic violence is itself a factor that leads women to seek employment, or employment and domestic violence are driven by an unmeasured third variable. In both cases, the causal interpretation of the impact of paid work on domestic violence would be erroneous. To address these issues, we use the JPFHS data to explore the effect of women's paid work outside the home on reported domestic violence. Several linear probability models and probit regressions<sup>2</sup> were applied to

explore the links between labor force participation and domestic violence, using instrumental variables<sup>3</sup> to control for endogeneity, i.e. the causality issues just discussed.

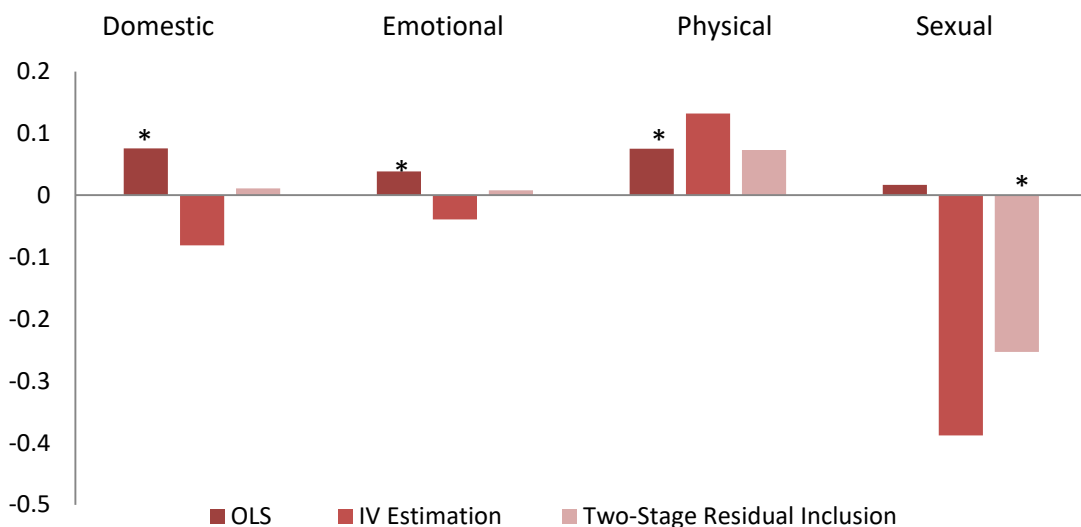
Figure 1, below, displays the three methods we used. The large difference in results illustrates the importance of selecting an appropriate method to measure the causal impact of employment on domestic violence. The first method, ordinary least squares (OLS), is a statistical method that estimates the level and strength of relationship between two variables, but does not take causality into account. The second method, instrumental variables (IV), is a more advanced statistical method that controls for endogeneity. The last method, the two-stage residual inclusion estimate, is a further tool used to address endogeneity issues, slightly different from the IV, and included as a robustness check.

## Main Results

- **There is no significant link between women’s employment and domestic violence.** At first glance, it seems that when women participate in paid work, it increases domestic violence (see OLS columns in Figure 1). After controlling for endogeneity (problems of reverse causality or other forms of bias), the links between women’s participation in paid work and the risk of domestic violence turned out to be insignificant (see IV estimation column in Figure 1). This suggests that women’s work status has no causal influence on marital violence. Performing the analysis with more disaggregated types of domestic violence, the regressions that do not consider endogeneity find that female employment increases emotional and physical violence, while it has no impact on sexual violence. When controlling for endogeneity, there is no causal effect of employment on physical or emotional violence.

**Figure 1. Change in Likelihood of Experiencing Domestic Violence from Non-Working to Working Wife**

By type of violence



\*Indicates that the coefficients are statistically significant

- **There is some evidence that women’s employment lowers sexual violence.** In the case of sexual violence, we find evidence that women’s employment lowers sexual violence (see the two-stage residual inclusion column in Figure 1). These last findings are consistent with the view that when a woman has greater bargaining power, that is, having a say in the household through paid work, it leads to a lower probability of experiencing sexual violence.
- **Education and wealth may influence the risk and type of domestic violence.** Very low and very high levels of the husband’s education appear to reduce physical violence, but the husband’s education has no significant influence on emotional and sexual violence. Surprisingly, a wife’s education decreases the incidence of sexual violence, but seems to have no link to the prevalence of emotional and physical violence. Wealth—the economic status of the household—is primarily related to physical violence, while the age difference between spouses was not significant to any type of violence. The prevalence of emotional and physical violence appears to be higher among households with multiple wives.

## Policy Lessons

- **Promoting paid work for women may help in reducing sexual violence.** The protective effect that employment has on sexual violence is small, but offers support to theories that predict an increase in women’s bargaining power through their participation in paid work. Organizations such as the United Nations, the OECD, and the World Bank, have broadly advocated for policies aimed at increasing women’s participation in the labor market. Such policies may enjoy some success in Jordan in combatting sexual violence.
- **Investing in education, training, and employment support may help to reduce domestic violence.** The husband’s characteristics such as greater education and employment are important protective factors against domestic abuse in Jordan. This supports the World Bank’s argument that additional supportive policies (including education and training programs, policies promoting safety and security, and so on) are needed to ensure that women’s employment can lead to reducing domestic violence overall.

## Further Reading

Lenze, J. & Klasen, S. (2017). Does Women’s Labor Force Participation Reduce Domestic Violence? Evidence from Jordan. *Feminist Economics*, 23(1), 1-29.  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13545701.2016.1211305>

## Endnotes

1. Endogeneity problems arise when factors examined within a given model either have an overlooked effect on one another, or are themselves overlooked. Examples include reverse causal effects between variables, or errors of omission in choosing variables to study.
2. Linear probability models and probit regressions are statistical methods used to quantify the relationship between different variables. It attempts to quantify the effect of one variable on another, e.g. how much does something respond to an increase or decrease in something else?
3. Instrumental variables refers to an econometric tool used to concisely estimate a relationship, e.g. disentangle the direction of causality between two variables, such as, does education increase income, or does income increase education?

## Ongoing Research

Currently, the GrOW G2E research team is engaged in comparative research from 12 developing countries to investigate the causal linkage between female employment and domestic violence across a range of economic, social, and cultural settings.

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The **GrOW initiative** funds 14 research projects aimed to empower women to participate in economic activities, providing evidence that can inform social and economic policies to improve poor women's lives, while promoting economic growth.

**Research Project – G2E (Growth to Empowerment)** is a project of the GrOW initiative: Pathways for shared prosperity: Understanding the links between women's economic empowerment and growth.

### Information

<https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/532926.html>

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