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ECONOMY & BUSINESS

Economics Journal: What Price for Women's Rights?

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CRIME ECONOMICS JOURNAL NARENDRA MODI RUPA SUBRAMANYA SHASHI THAROOR

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By Rupa Subramanya



— Agence France-Presse/Getty Images There is a backlash – in the form of routine denigration – against women's growing empowerment. Rupa Subramanya explains why.

In recent months, there has been much coverage of horrific crimes against women in India. These crimes include rape, murder, sexual abuse, and other forms of violence.

The reaction of at least some of India's political class has been far from helpful. In the state of Haryana, for example, where there has been an increase in the reporting of sexual violence against women, local leaders have allegedly blamed everything **from the consumption of chow mein** to the idea that girls who aren't married off by the time they are 16 are **more likely to be raped** as they search for sexual satisfaction.

In addition, there is a backlash – in the form of routine denigration – against women's growing empowerment. In the latest such instance from a prominent public personality, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi **crassly referred to** Sunanda Pushkar, a successful businesswoman and wife of Congress Member of Parliament Shashi Tharoor, as a "Rs 50 crore [500 million rupee] girlfriend."

To be fair though, the U.S. political landscape features its share of bizarre and egregious comments by public figures, notably the **recent claim** by Rep. Todd Akin (R., Mo.) that in cases of "legitimate rape" a women's body would try to prevent a pregnancy. Some commentators have gone so far as to say there is a **"war against**

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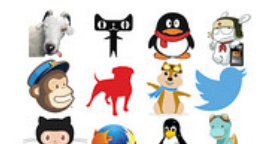
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women." Here in India, that battle was joined long ago.

Some legislative changes in India have attempted to redress historical wrongs against women. In one important instance, the Hindu Succession Act (1956) aimed to undo the traditional Hindu convention that sons inherited family property and women had almost no inheritance rights. Loopholes in the law — in particular with regard to joint family property and tenancy rights — were closed by an amendment to the act passed in 2005. Taken together, the original act and its amendment went a long way toward giving Hindu women equal rights to inherit family property. It therefore represented an important milestone in women's rights in India.

Unfortunately, well-intentioned and indeed vital legislative changes do sometimes carry unintended harmful consequences. **A recent study** by economics professors Siwan Anderson of the University of British Columbia and Garance Genicot of Georgetown University explored the relationship between improved property rights for women in India and the incidence of suicide among both men and women. The potential correlation between women's social status and the incidence of suicide was noted as long ago as the 19th century by Emile Durkheim, the French scholar who along with the German Max Weber is credited as being the father of modern sociology.

A 1987 study by sociologist Stephen Stack of Auburn University using U.S. data documented a positive relationship between the labor force participation of women, which is one important measure of economic empowerment, and an increase in the suicide rate of both men and women. Similar results are found in other countries.

Ms. Anderson and Ms. Genicot found that this pattern also exists in India. Exploiting the fact that from the time of the original succession act in 1956 to its amendment nearly 50 years later, different states in India independently chose to strengthen women's inheritance rights at different dates, the scholars were able to establish a relationship between suicide and property rights. In line with the earlier research, they found that strengthened property rights for women correlated with a narrowing in the difference between female and male suicide rates (there were more female suicides relative to male suicides), as well as an increase in the absolute numbers of both male and female suicides. Over the period of study, 1967-2004, average suicide rates were 11 per 100,000 for men and 7.3 for women, giving a male to female suicide ratio of about 1.5.

Why do improved property rights for women lead to worse outcomes in terms of suicide for both men and women? Consistent with sociological research, Ms. Anderson and Ms. Genicot suggest that strengthened female property rights increase the bargaining power of women in the household, which leads to greater conflict between husbands and wives. This in turn leads to more suicides by both husbands and wives.

While it is impossible to test this theory directly, the researchers were able to show that strengthened property rights for women increased the incidence of wife battery. And if more wives are being beaten by their husbands, it's reasonable to assume that conflict within a household has increased. That's the sense in which higher incidence of suicide among both men and women is, in my judgment, yet another manifestation of the wider phenomenon of violence against women.

Paradoxically, a frustrated husband committing suicide because his wife is now empowered is in itself a reflection of women's unequal social status.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the findings of this research have aroused controversy. Several social activists, women's groups and scholars in India are attacking the study for being "misogynistic and patriarchal," **according to this report** in the Times of India.

These critics have obviously missed the point of the study. The authors explicitly state that, notwithstanding their research findings, they would never advocate reducing gender equality because of its impact on suicide rates. What is more, they argue that these harmful effects will attenuate over time as society adapts to a more equal status for women.

Indeed, the research by the sociologist Mr. Stack shows that the relationship between women's labor force participation and increased suicide in the U.S. dropped off significantly after the mid-1960s as compared to the immediate post-war period, when long lasting social change began in the U.S as the impact of the feminist movement truly began to take hold.

The correct lesson to take from this new research by Ms. Anderson and Ms. Genicot is that the process of women's empowerment is necessarily going to be a bumpy road and there will be bad news along the way. Far from being a patriarchal and misogynistic finding, it suggests instead that we must persevere until society changes to the point where women's empowerment becomes a non-issue.

But as the recent accounts from India and even the U.S. suggest, we still have a long way to go.



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