

A House for Two: Empowering Women with Property Rights

Akanksha Vardani*

[Please click here for the latest version](#)

Abstract

Formal property ownership may not empower women unless it is understood by those they interact with. I study the effect of improving awareness about property rights on women's empowerment through a field experiment in rural Maharashtra. I work in a setting where after a recent policy change married women are documented owners but only 26% believe they are. I randomize an awareness campaign across 1,783 households that informs both spouses that women co-own their property and delivers a physical copy of the ownership document. The campaign improves knowledge that women hold property rights, increases expenditure on women-specific goods by 40%, and reduces men's alcohol consumption by 33%, though it has no overall effect on domestic violence. I develop and test an intra-household bargaining model, which highlights that the effect of the campaign may differ when the woman already knows but the spouse does not, and where neither know. Consistent with the model's predictions, the strongest consumption effects are observed in households with the lowest initial beliefs about women's ownership, while reductions in domestic violence occur in households where the husband's initial beliefs are lower than the wife's. This study highlights how shifting beliefs about women's rights is essential to realizing the full impact of large-scale government programs.

*Department of Economics, Columbia University.

I am indebted to Michael Best, Pierre-André Chiappori, Cristian Pop-Eleches, Bernard Salanié and Jack Willis for their invaluable support and guidance. This paper greatly benefited from discussions with César Barilla, Anja Benshaul-Tolonen, Palaash Bhargava, Daniel Björkegren, Sandra Black, Laura Boudreau, Christina Brown, Rosella Calvi, Pascaline Dupas, Florian Grosset-Touba, Karla Hoff, Dashleen Kaur, Tushar Kundu, Eliana La Ferrara, Sylvie Lambert, Madeline McKelway, Beatrice Montano, Ricardo Pommer Muñoz, Suresh Naidu, Suanna Oh, Sebastián Otero, Simon Quinn, Pauline Rossi, Srishti Singh, Alessandra Voena and Eric Verhoogen and from comments by multiple seminar and conference participants. I am thankful for the support from Ayush Prasad and his team at Pune Zilla Parishad along with Sudha Kothari and her team at Chaitanya. Janhavi Mandke provided excellent research assistance. I gratefully acknowledge financial support from NBER Gender in the Economy program, and the Program for Economic Research and Center for Development Economics and Policy at Columbia University. Research approved by Columbia University IRB and Monk Prayogshalla IRB. AEA RCT Registry ID: AEARCTR-0011432. All errors and omissions are my own.