

# The Power of Persuasion: Causal Effects of Household Communication on Women's Employment

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# Communication in the Household

- In many economic settings, agents lack decision rights but provide input
  - E.g. sender-receiver models, bosses and subordinates, salespeople and buyers
- HH decision-making in conservative, developing settings can be seen this way
  - Gender norms and inequities (Anderson 2024, Jayachandran 2015 & 2021, UN 2015, World Bank 2012) grant husbands decision rights and limit wives' influence to providing input
  - In our rural Indian sample, 50% of women are one of the HH members with final say, but 90% give input
- In standard economic models of such settings, agents communicate optimally
- At the other end of the spectrum,
  - Vast literature in psychology, management, experimental economics on effective communication
  - Popular culture is rife with tips for women to sway HH decisions via communication

**GOOD  
HOUSEKEEPING**

## **How to Turn No into Yes!**

**woman's day**

## **The Power of Persuasion**

Learn how to get what you want with these four helpful tips

*Ladies' Home Journal* □ February, 1968

**“HUSBANDESE”—THE NEW LANGUAGE OF INTIMATE PERSUASION  
BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE □ BY DR. HAIM GINOTT**



# HH Communication about Women's Labor Supply in India

- Study women's communication skills in decisions about female labor supply, one of the most consequential, policy-relevant decisions HHs make
  - Large gender gaps in labor market outcomes globally (Agte et al. 2024), and India has some of the widest gaps (Chancel et al. 2022, World Bank 2024)
  - Implications for allocation of talent and macroeconomic growth (Ashraf et al. 2022b, Chiplunkar & Goldberg 2021, Chiplunkar & Kleineberg 2024, Hsieh et al. 2019)
- One widely discussed constraint to female employment in India: husbands
  - Men less supportive of female employment than women, husbands control wives' labor supply (Bernhardt et al. 2018, Bursztyn et al. 2024, Field et al. 2021, Lowe & McKelway 2025)
  - Estimated over 30% of out-of-labor-force women want to work (Fletcher et al. 2018)

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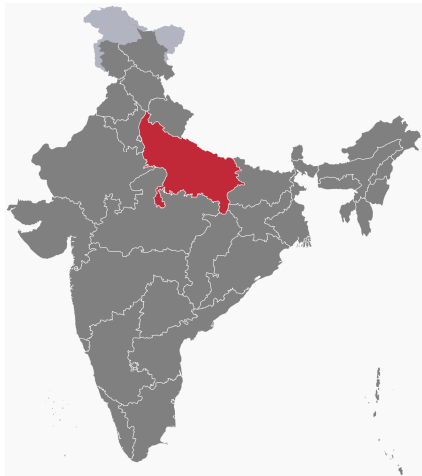
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  - Estimated over 30% of out-of-labor-force women want to work (Fletcher et al. 2018)
- This paper: could communication skills enable women to persuade their husbands to let them work?

# Field Experiment in Rural Uttar Pradesh, India



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- Female labor supply *the* most common topic spouses in sample disagree about
- Disagreement generally means wife more interested
  - 53% of couples differ in support for wife's work
  - In 81% of those couples, the wife is more interested



# Communication Treatment

- Randomized whether women given communication training before firm's job opened
- Designed by WorldBeing, NGO providing evidence-based psychosocial programs worldwide
- Training in *assertive communication* (Lazarus 1973, Peneva & Mavrodiev 2013)
  - Means expressing your point of view clearly while still respecting others
  - WorldBeing combined and evolved assertive techniques for our setting
- Key technique taught: "See-Feel-Want" statement (WorldBeing 2022)
  - Describe objectively how you see situation, explain emotions it's making you *feel*, say what you *want*
  - E.g. *"Our son could really benefit from tutoring, but it's expensive. I'm feeling worried about how we'll pay for it. I think I should start working. I could earn enough to cover tutoring, and now that the kids are older I need less time for housework."*

## Communication Treatment (Continued)

- Training delivered in six, one-hour sessions held with groups of women over a month
  - Content conveyed in a variety of formats, including instruction, storytelling, and group activities
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  - Differs from colloquial use of assertive to mean pushy, off-putting
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- Use active control group
  - Held same sorts of meetings with control group, in which women took group surveys and played games
  - To control for the effects of attending sessions unrelated to communication

## “First Stage” Effects on Use of Assertive Communication

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	% Assertive Responses	Summarize Situation (=1)	Describe Emotions (=1)	Tell Him What (=1)	Tell Him Why (=1)
Treat	4.755*** (1.596)	0.072*** (0.027)	0.038 (0.024)	-0.003 (0.028)	0.082*** (0.029)
Control Mean	48.512	0.575	0.248	0.582	0.536
N	1400	1400	1400	1400	1400

Strata controls included. Standard errors clustered by meeting group.

- Survey 5 weeks later asked what women would say to husband if they disagreed about given topic
  - Surveyors matched open-ended responses to options, which we categorize into communication styles
- Effect on % assertive responses  $\approx$  0.2 standard deviations
- No effect on use of negotiation (Ashraf et al. 2020) or other dimensions of empowerment

# Labor Supply: Data and Analysis

- Administrative data on application and earnings in firm's program
  - Program began three weeks after treatment ended
  - Observe earnings monthly for first 10 months
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- Estimate effects by pre-specified dimension of heterogeneity: indicator for women reporting greater interest in employment than husbands at baseline
  - Theory predicts communication should raise labor supply only when women more interested
  - 43% of the sample in this subgroup



## Treatment Raised Labor Supply in Subgroup

	Applied (=1)		Total Earnings (Rs)
Treat	0.012 (0.027)	-0.025 (0.033)	-330.425 (424.773)
W More Interested		-0.034 (0.028)	-158.375 (460.993)
Treat x W More Interested		0.085** (0.041)	1205.659** (605.220)
P-Val: Treat + Interaction		0.095*	0.091*
Omitted Group Mean	0.192	0.205	1796.482
N	1540	1523	1523

Strata controls included. Standard errors clustered by meeting group.

- Treatment increased application in subgroup by 35%
- Effect on earnings represents a 53% increase

## Persistence and Overall Employment

	Month 10 Earnings (Rs.)	Any Employment (=1)
Treat	-27.176 (35.443)	-0.055 (0.040)
W More Interested	-35.478 (34.372)	-0.039 (0.046)
Treat x W More Interested	112.857** (49.199)	0.128** (0.059)
P-Val: Treat + Interaction	0.033**	0.099*
Omitted Group Mean	104.614	0.430
N	1523	1344

Strata controls included. Standard errors clustered by meeting group.

- Earnings effect persistent
  - Month-10 effect is 124% increase!
- Overall employment increases
  - Treatment not just leading to substitution across sectors but increasing overall employment

# Mechanisms

1. Is heterogeneity driven by disagreement in preferences, or correlate of this?
  - “First stage” effect doesn't differ by subgroup; woman-more-interested subgroup didn't learn skills better
  - Heterogeneity remains when including predictors of subgroup and their interactions with treatment
    - Control for unobserved characteristics of opposing husbands using opposition in *other* decisions

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  - Heterogeneity remains when including predictors of subgroup and their interactions with treatment
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2. How did treatment change HH decisions about labor supply in subgroup?
  - Treatment did not affect proxies for bargaining power, or women’s own interest in employment
  - Instead, we find evidence that it raised husbands’ support for women’s employment
    - Results most consistent with women providing arguments that informed husbands’ expected utility

# Conclusion

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- Communication training had large, persistent effects on female labor supply. Is it cost effective?
- Compare to vocational training, more traditional labor market policy and significant focus in India
- Back-of-the-envelope estimate is that the cost of getting one woman employed from government-funded vocational training in India is about \$6,500
- Our treatment could get a woman employed for *less than 12%* of that
- Communication training provides a highly cost-effective way to increase women's employment