

# Nishtha Sharma

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## RESEARCH INTERESTS

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**Fields:** Behavioral Economics, Development Economics, Political Economy, Public Economics, Labor Economics

**Topics:** Charitable Behavior, Conflict, Inequality

**Methodologies:** Applied Microeconomic Theory, Experiments

## RESEARCH POSITIONS

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**Postdoctoral Research Associate** (2022–2025)

Social Science Division, New York University Abu Dhabi

**Fund Intern** (2021)

Fund Internship Program (FIP), International Monetary Fund

## EDUCATION

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**Ph.D. in Economics** University of California, Irvine (2022)

**Master of Economics** Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi (2014)

**Bachelor of Economics (Honors)** University of Delhi (2011)

## JOB MARKET PAPER

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### “The Economics of Begging”

(with Samreen Malik)

**Abstract:** We collect novel data on begging activity and incentivized measures of preferences and perceptions of beggars and donors in India. Extensive field observations and experiments reveal three main empirical findings. First, about 30% of beggars use costly signaling, offering low-cost, low-value items to signal a preference for paid work, which increases donations by 35%, thus more than compensating for the costs of items. Second, 87% choose paid work over free cash, thus suggesting that begging is not a choice, and instead a consequence of limited access to employment, with its prevalence resistant to legal penalties or increased donor generosity. Third, donors have strong preferences for giving only in case of real need (when paid work is not an option), but they underestimate how many beggars actually prefer paid work. Viewed through the lens of our theoretical model, these misperceptions, combined with fairness preferences, result in suboptimal donations. Thus, addressing barriers to employment, rather than focusing on discouraging donations or legal punitive measures, may be more effective in reducing begging.

**Award:** Econometric Society’s Best Paper in Applied Economics Award (Sharma, 2022)

**Invited Seminars** (2024): Harvard University, University of Chicago, Boston University, Brown University, Boston College, Tufts University

**Conferences:** ASSA-AEA Annual Meeting (2025), North East Universities Development Consortium (2024), Economic Science Association North America Meeting (2024), Theoretical Research in Economic Development (2024), Advances in Field Experiments (2024), Indian Statistical Institute Annual Conference on Economic Growth and Development (2023, 2024), Asian Meeting of the Econometric Society (2022, 2023)

### “The Persistence of Disadvantages: Theory and Experiment”

*(Revise and Resubmit at Games and Economic Behavior)*

**Abstract:** *Many economic situations involve contests for resources, such as winning prizes and earning bonuses. The likelihood of success in such contests is often skewed, favoring some competitors while putting others at a disadvantage. I study the strategic interaction between an advantaged and a disadvantaged competitor in a repeated contest where winning can help overcome the initial disadvantage. Theoretically, the competition for advantage increases effort by both competitors, but the advantaged competitor increases effort more than the disadvantaged competitor. As a result, the disadvantaged competitor is even less likely to win when they have the potential to overcome their disadvantage, and the initial disadvantage is persistent. Evidence from a laboratory experiment supports these theoretical predictions.*

**Status:** Revise and Resubmit at Games and Economic Behavior

**Invited Seminars:** Monash University (2023), Bilkent University (2021), University of Bath (2021)

**Conferences:** Behavioral Research in Economics - Economic Science Association Workshop (2022), Delhi School of Economics Winter School (2022), Indian Statistical Institute Annual Conference on Economic Growth and Development (2022), Economic Science Association Global Meetings (2021), Southern Economic Association Meeting (2021), Contests: Theory and Evidence Conference (2020, 2021), Association for the Study of Religion Economics and Culture Conference (2019)

### “Can’t Agree to Disagree: Fairness Concerns and Conflict”

*(with Ernesto Reuben)*

**Abstract:** *We examine how concerns about fairness influence the impact of income inequality on social conflict. While some studies suggest that inequality exacerbates conflict, others find no significant effects. We reconcile these discrepancies by introducing and testing a fairness mechanism that accounts for varying perceptions of income allocation. We hypothesize that conflict arises not merely from inequality, but from disagreement over whether such inequality is merit-based (and thus fair) or luck-based (and thus unfair). If inequality is universally perceived as either fair or unfair, conflict is minimal as income allocation is either accepted or peacefully renegotiated. However, when there is disagreement over perceptions of the source of inequality, conflict over the right to redistribute ensues. We test our theoretical results using a controlled laboratory experiment.*

**Status:** Data Collection in Progress

### “Lawful Progress: Unveiling the Laws That Reshape Women’s Work Decisions”

*(with Anna Fruttero and Diego Gomes)*

**Abstract:** *This paper examines the impact of women’s legal rights on labor force participation decisions made by women and men through a granular analysis of 35 gendered laws. Building on previous literature, it departs from the analysis using aggregate indices due to concerns about (i) the usability of an index for policymaking purposes, (ii) the economic interpretation of an index’s average marginal effects, and (iii) the implicit assumption of homogeneous effects underlying regressions with an index. The findings identify nine key laws that can foster female labor force participation. Notably, laws related to household dynamics and women’s agency within the family,*

*such as divorce and property rights laws, and laws regarding the ability of women to travel outside the home, are especially important in influencing their decision to work. The paper also shows that improving women's legal rights does not negatively affect men's labor force participation.*

**Status:** IMF Working Paper No. 2023/252

**Conference:** International Economic Association-World Bank Conference 2024

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#### COMPETITIVE GRANTS & FELLOWSHIPS

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**New York University Abu Dhabi** (2022-2024)

Development Cluster Research Grant, Culture and Diversity Cluster Research Grant, Inequality Cluster Research Grant, Experimental Research Grant

**University of California, Irvine** (2017-2022)

Experimental Social Science Laboratory Research Grant, Associate Dean's Dissertation Fellowship, Kugelman Citizen Peace-building Fellowship, Center for Global Peace and Conflict Studies Research Grant, Initiatives to End Family Violence Research Grant

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#### TEACHING POSITIONS

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**Teaching Assistant** (2016-2020)

Department of Economics, University of California, Irvine

Graduate Level: Microeconomic Theory I, Microeconomic Theory II: Game Theory

Undergraduate Level: Intermediate Microeconomics (Virtual), Probability Theory, Managerial Economics, Economics of Strategy, Basic Macroeconomics, Basic Microeconomics

**Instructor** (2015-2016)

Indian School of Business and Finance, London School of Economics and Political Science, International Center, New Delhi, India

Undergraduate Level: Introduction to Economics: Microeconomics and Macroeconomics

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#### RESEARCH VISITS

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Department of Economics New York University (2024)

Department of Economics Tufts University (2024)

Questrom School of Business Boston University (2024)

Department of Economics Monash University (2023)

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#### SERVICE AND LEADERSHIP

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**Referee:** Experimental Economics, Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization, Journal of Economic Dynamics and Control, Frontiers in Behavioral Economics

**Organizer:** Theory, History, and Political Economy Workshop UC Irvine (2020)

**Graduate Student Mentor** UC Irvine (2019)

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#### REFERENCES

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**John Duffy**

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**Samreen Malik**

New York University AD  
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**Ernesto Reuben**

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