Nishtha Sharma

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Research Fields

Behavioral Economics and Experimental Economics, Labor Economics, Political Economy

Employment

Assistant Professor of Economics (2025 - Present)
Department of Economics and Empirical Legal Studies, Charles University
Postdoctoral Research Associate (2022–2025)
Social Science Division, New York University Abu Dhabi
Fund Intern (2021)
Fund Internship Program (FIP), International Monetary Fund

Education

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)

Publications

The Persistence of Disadvantages: Theory and Experiment

Games and Economic Behavior, 2026

***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.*

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)

Legal Barriers, Social Norms, and Female Labor Force Participation *(with Daniela Behr and Anna Fruttero)*

Labour, Forthcoming December 2026

***Abstract**: Legal gender equality has advanced worldwide, yet female labor force participation remains uneven across countries. This paper studies why similar legal reforms generate different* *labor market outcomes across contexts. We develop a simple dynamic model in which women's labor market participation depends jointly on legal barriers and a social or normative cost that evolves endogenously with observed female labor force participation. The model formalizes a threshold mechanism: legal reform raises participation only if it is sufficiently strong to offset prevailing normative costs, which vary across societies. This framework clarifies why identical reforms may trigger self-reinforcing participation gains in some countries but fail to produce measurable effects in others. Guided by the model's testable predictions, we combine the Women, Business and the Law (WBL) index with gender-attitude measures from the World Values Survey and estimate the effects of large legal reforms using a staggered difference-in-differences design à la Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) for 155 economies over 1990–2023. Consistent with the model, legal reforms increase female labor force participation only in countries with relatively progressive gender norms, while reforms have no statistically discernible effect in more norm-conservative settings. The results highlight that legal reform is necessary but not sufficient: its effectiveness depends critically on the normative environment in which it is implemented.*

Working Papers

The Economics of Begging *(with Samreen Malik)*

***Abstract**: We provide the first large-scale evidence on the economics of begging, combining field observations with incentivized experiments involving over 2,000 beggars and donors in India. Guided by a signaling model in which donors give less when begging is by choice, we show that 31 percent of beggars use costly effort signaling by offering low-value items. Donors perceive these beggars as less labor-averse and give more. Yet, donors significantly overestimate the share of labor-averse beggars, while most beggars prefer paid work over free cash. Our findings suggest that reducing employment barriers may curb begging more effectively than fairness-driven legal restrictions.*

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)
Media: International Growth Center - Ideas for India, December 2024

Lawful Progress: Unveiling the Laws That Reshape Women's Work Decisions
(with Anna Fruttero and Diego Gomes)
IMF Working Paper No. 2023/252

***Abstract**: We examine 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, we depart from the analyses 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. Further, we find that improving women's legal rights does not negatively affect men's participation in the labor force.*

Can't Agree to Disagree: Fairness Concerns and Conflict *(with Ernesto Reuben)*

Abstract: *We study how concerns about fairness influence the relationship between income inequality and preference for conflict. Existing literature provides mixed results on whether inequality exacerbates conflict, where some find a positive effect while others fail to find any effect. We propose and test a fairness mechanism which addresses this discrepancy and suggests that conflict arises not solely from inequality but from disagreement over whether such inequality is merit-based (and thus fair) or luck-based (and thus unfair). When perceptions align and inequality is agreed on as fair or unfair, conflict remains minimal. However, disagreement over fairness perceptions leads to increased conflict over redistribution rights. Experimental evidence confirms the theoretical predictions.*

Competitive Grants & Fellowships

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

Research Visits

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)

Teaching Experience

Teaching Assistant (2016–2020)
Department of Economics and Paul Merage School of Business, University of California, Irvine
Graduate Courses: Microeconomic Theory I, Microeconomic Theory II: Game Theory, and quantitative methods courses emphasizing experimental design and statistical analysis.
Undergraduate Courses: Intermediate Microeconomics (Virtual), Probability Theory, Managerial Economics, Economics of Strategy, Basic Macroeconomics, Basic Microeconomics

Assistant Professor (2015–2016)
Indian School of Business and Finance, London School of Economics and Political Science, International Center, New Delhi, India
Course: Introduction to Economics (Microeconomics and Macroeconomics)

Service and Leadership

Organizer: Theory, History, and Political Economy Workshop — UC Irvine (2020)
Graduate Student Mentor — UC Irvine (2019)