

Individual and Structural antecedents of women's empowerment in India

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This paper proposes to address the need for empirical analysis and potential challenge to some of the assumptions made in the extant gender literature, by examining the dialectic of context and individual agency for married women in India. The study proposes to develop an empowerment index by explicitly considering the measurement errors and the differential importance of the indicators that are thought to reflect the larger empowerment construct. The proposed study aims to go beyond the simplistic and limited measures of education and work dimensions of women, to consider more fundamental and structural factors involving family, social and economic organization. The study proposes to draw data from the India Human Development Survey (2004-05), an all India survey conducted across 33 Indian states and union territories. The results from this study may help to understand the nexus between individual (agency) and community (structure) behavior, given the existing normative structures in India.

Introduction

Many of the contemporary debates about gender in India reflect aspects of the older, centuries' long struggle over the "women question." Authors argue that such debates and disagreements on gender issues have to be understood with reference to the multilingual, multicultural nature of India, which has led to the development of different perspectives on gender, intersectionality, and power inequalities (Purkayastha, et al, 2003). Thus there exist overlapping dimensions to understand how gender is being conceptualized in the Indian context. Evidence of the limited control that Indian women exercise over their own lives is increasingly documented. Studies underscore their limited control over material and other resources, their restricted access to knowledge and information, their constrained authority to make independent decisions, their enforced lack of physical mobility, and their inability to forge equitable power relationships within families (Basu 1992; Visaria 1996; Jejeebhoy 2000).

As theoretical work on women's empowerment has evolved, the tension between structure and agency has also grown in the gender literature (Desai and Johnson, 2005). However, though at the conceptual level, these two approaches—one focusing on agency the other on structure—can be complementary (Kabeer, 1994) but in practice it is particularly difficult to disentangle the two and operationalize these for empirical research. In an attempt to address this deficiency, this paper examines the extent to which gender context and individual agency impacts women's ability to make independent decisions regarding child health, emergency care and allocation of household resources .

.Empowerment: Definition, theoretical framework and methodological challenges

Although definitions of empowerment differ, most scholars agree that it implies having greater control over one's life (Sen, Mitali, *et al*, 2006). Empowerment has been

interpreted variously as the extent to which women have the freedom to participate in domains that are either private or public. It has been commonly measured using dimensions like mobility, control over resources, and decision-making power in the household (Kishor and Subaiya, 2005; Bloom et. al., 2001; Mason and Smith 2000; Govindasamy and Malhotra 1996; Jejeebhoy 1991, 2000; Kabeer, 1999). Though authors have pointed out that measuring and trying to quantify complex and abstract concept as this is an imperfect exercise, but they operationally define women's empowerment as the degree to which they can control material resources (including food, income, different forms of wealth) and social resources (including knowledge, power and prestige) within the family, in the community and in the society at large (Desai and Johnson, 2005). In lines with Desai and Johnson (2005), I argue that women's authority over household decision making embodies both the family and the community.

Among an array of questions designed to capture women's empowerment, the IHDS (2004-05) survey asked women the following:

- Who in your family decides the following things:
 - What to cook on a daily basis?*
 - Whether to buy an expensive item such as TV or fridge?*
 - How many children you will have?*
 - What to do if a child falls sick?*
 - To whom your children should marry?*

[Note: The items on child sickness and whom the children should marry were asked only of women with children]

The women had the following response options: respondent, husband, senior male, senior female, other and decision not made/not applicable.

As Desai and Johnson (2005) point out that apart from selecting good indicators of women's empowerment, it is important to distinguish between empowerment as a characteristic of individuals and empowerment as a trait of community participation (Mason and Smith, 2003). Thus as Mason (2005) envisages that women's empowerment is likely to involve not only gaining new individual capabilities, but also the emergence of new beliefs about their right to exercise these capabilities and take advantage of opportunities in their community. Another potential challenge in conceptualizing women's empowerment is that empowerment is multidimensional with imperfect associations among its different dimensions and this becomes particularly clear in the case of gender relations, which span the private and the public spheres which again are often dissimilar in patriarchal societies (*ibid*).

In order to address these challenges this paper distinguishes between the two domains- individual and community- by calculating district specific measures of women's ability to make independent decisions. Within each sampled district, calculations will be made to capture the proportion of women who say have final decision-making authority in at least one of the domains listed above. By using a recent all India data set (IHDS, 2004-05) this study thus proposes to build on prior work by exploring the following research questions:

- Whether the concept of gender empowerment in India is an individual property of women or whether it is socially determined.

- To what extent empowerment is associated with (a) Her own employment status; (b) family dynamics
- To explore the dynamics of individual variation in gender empowerment versus any community/regional variation in India

Data and methods

The present study draws data from the *India Human Development Survey (IHDS: 2004-05)* designed by University of Maryland, College Park and National Council of Applied Economic Research, India: a survey conducted across 33 Indian states and union territories, collecting responses from 41,554 households. The primary objective of this survey was to gather reliable information on health, education, employment, income and gender empowerment from both rural and urban India.

As part of the survey, ever-married women between the ages of 15 and 49 were asked a series of five questions about decision making in the household. This module is patterned after a similar module in the SWAF surveys (Smith et. al., 2000).

Dependent variable:

In the multivariate analyses, empowerment is measured as a decision making index that ranges from 0 (least power) to 4. The scale consists of sum of the number of issues on which the woman identifies that person as having the most say in the household. This paper excludes the cooking item from these counts as cooking is generally regarded as one of women's essential responsibilities within the household so it is expected to have lower correlation with the other four decisions.

Using this decision making index as a dependent variable, we will try to distinguish between the contextual impact on women's decision making power and the impact of women's own characteristics. Our prima facie evidence, presented in Tables 1 and 2 suggests that the social context plays a far greater role in shaping women's decision making power than their own characteristics. For example, in Table 1, the score on decision making index for women with no education is 0.69 compared to 0.84 for women with college education. In contrast, the range between states is far greater with women in Madhya Pradesh having a mean of 0.34 compared to 1.01 in Himachal Pradesh and 1.72 in Tamil Nadu.

-----Tables 1 and 2 about here-----

These preliminary observations will be extended to multivariate analysis in order to distinguish between the role of individual agency and personal characteristics (such as age, education, family structure, years of marriage and employment status) and structural characteristics of the district. We will use hierarchical models to apportion the variance in women's decision making to within and between district components in order to gain insights into the role of contextual factors.

Table 1: Mean Score on Women's Decision Making Index by Education

Illiterate	0.69
1-5 grades	0.75
6-10 Grades	0.70
10-12 Grades	0.76
Any College	0.84

Source: India Human Development Survey, 2005

Table 2: Mean score on women's decision making by State of Residence

Andhra Pradesh	0.59
Assam	0.88
Bihar	0.73
Chhatisghar	0.26
Delhi	0.73
Gujarat, Daman, Dadra	0.57
Haryana	0.45
Himachal Pradesh	1.01
Jammu & Kashmir	1.03
Jharkhand	0.85
Karnataka	0.49
Kerala	0.70
Madhya Pradesh	0.34
Maharashtra/Goa	0.66
North East	2.06
Orissa	0.61
Punjab	0.77
Rajasthan	0.43
Tamil Nadu/Pondicherry	1.73
Uttar Pradesh	0.48
Uttarkhand	0.85
West Bengal	0.82

Source: India Human Development Survey, 2005

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