

Disempowered by Whom?

Gender vs. Generation in India

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Abstract

Research on gender inequalities has been greatly enhanced by the now frequent use of decision-making and permission questions found in many household surveys. Our concern in this paper is that one potential line of research with these questions has been overlooked and that this neglect may limit our understanding of the results of earlier analyses. These decision making questions derived from a concern to measure more directly the empowerment basis of gender inequalities. However, the questions actually tap into more than just a gender dimension of household decision making. While much of the gender interest is in whether these decisions are made by the husband or the wife, in the context of developing societies where extended families are common and even normative, women frequently respond that an important voice in these decisions is their father-in-law's or mother-in-law's. We argue that it is useful to disentangle the extent to which a woman is being disempowered by her husband versus others in her household. By ignoring the full dynamics of power distributions within a family, we may be conflating inequalities of gender with those of generation and thereby mis-specifying our models of empowerment. We use data from a new 40,000 household survey, the India Human Development Survey, 2004-2005, to examine how a respondent's lack of power is a function of gender and/or generation.

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Research on gender inequalities has been greatly enhanced by the now frequent use of decision-making and permission questions found in many household surveys. The development of a standard module of decision-making questions by the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) has opened up a rapidly expanding research trajectory of demographic research. A similar, even more detailed, set of questions from the five country Survey on the Status of Women and Fertility (SWAF) has also led to a series of important analyses that now shape the way we think about empowerment.

Responses to these empowerment questions have now been linked to a wide variety of demographic outcomes. And the distinction between household and community level measures has further enriched our understanding of how gender relations shape demographic behaviors and outcomes.

Our concern in this paper is that one potential line of research with these questions has been overlooked and that this neglect may limit our understanding of the results of earlier analyses. These decision making questions derived from a concern to measure more directly the empowerment basis of gender inequalities. In the DHS, for instance, the questions are included in the eligible women's interview and are usually used in analyses of the impact of gender relations on demographic and social outcomes.

However, the questions actually tap into more than just a gender dimension of household decision making. While much of the gender interest is in whether these decisions are made by the husband or the wife, in the context of developing societies where extended families are common and even normative, women frequently respond that an important voice in these decisions is their father-in-law's or mother-in-law's. Especially when it is the mother-in-law (or elder sister-in-law) whose authority is supreme, it is not clear whether the respondent's lack of empowerment should be interpreted as a necessarily gendered dimension of autonomy.

While most studies acknowledge that the respondent's autonomy can be defined in relation to men *and* to other women, they often interpret their results primarily or even exclusively within a context of patriarchy and explicitly or implicitly implicate males as the disempowering agent (Dharmalingam and Morgan, 1996, Mahler, 1996, Morgan and Niraula 1995, Remez 2003). This exclusive gender focus is not surprising since disaggregated results usually show that the husband is the more common locus of decision-making in the family and even when in-laws are identified, it is more often the father-in-law. Nevertheless, a mother-in-law is sometimes acknowledged which implies that something more than gender is being used to establish dominance in the family. And even those households (or decisions) for which the father-in-law is the central authority are apt to be somewhat different than the households or decisions for which the husband is the final authority.

We argue that it is useful to disentangle the extent to which a woman is being disempowered by her husband versus others in her household. By ignoring the full dynamics of

power distributions within a family, we may be conflating inequalities of gender with those of generation and thereby mis-specifying our models of empowerment.

We use data from a new 40,000 household survey in India, the Human Development Profile of India, 2004-2005, to examine how a respondent's lack of power is a function of gender and/or generation. This survey has an appropriately detailed set of gendered and generational alternatives in its decision-making module and a rich array of household and demographic measures that can be related to variations in gender and generation in decision-making. Thus, in addition to examining the extent of generational inequalities in responses to these questions, we also explore whether the correlates of women's disempowerment are different depending on who else in the family holds decision-making authority.

The Nature of Empowerment

Though the definition of women's empowerment varies, most scholars agree that it involves having greater control over one's life. It has been commonly measured using dimensions like decision-making power in the household, mobility and control over resources (Govindasamy and Malhotra 1996; Jejeebhoy 1991; Mason and Smith 2000).

Research on women's empowerment has been relatively silent about which other members, apart from the husband and wife, are primary decision makers within the family. For example, while many studies have identified the husband as the primary power to decide the number of children in most families, it is less clear who makes the primary decision in the remaining families.

These other centers of power in the family are important because extended families are quite common in many parts of the developing world and in particular, in India where this research is located. The ideal "joint" family is a multigenerational household with parents, their sons, the son's wives and all their children. In reality, joint families are rarely intact, but do include members beyond the nuclear family. In such families a woman's position in the household depends not only on her relation to her husband but also to other members in the household. While there is ethnographic evidence that the daughter-in-law or the younger sister-in-law in a household is the most disempowered member, little is known about the intra-family power dynamics between various genders and generations when it comes to specific domains of decision-making. It is not uncommon in India for the senior generation to make decisions on behalf of a couple, even if they do not reside together.

Empowerment is now widely recognized as being multi-dimensional, such that all dimensions need not necessarily correlate with the same set of determinants or outcomes (Malhotra and Mather, 1997; Bradley and Khor, 1993; Mason, 1986). Several studies have shown that fertility decisions, economic decisions, social decisions and organizational decisions are imperfectly correlated. We expect that gender and generation will be differentially important in these various realms of decision making.

Determinants of Empowerment: Gender vs. Generation

Theoretically, inequalities based on gender have different underlying bases than those based on generation. Systems of kinship have rules of marriage and descent that ultimately have implications for both gender and generation. While we think it is useful to make a conceptual distinction between gender and generational dimensions of authority, we recognize that in practice these systems may be inter-related and even mutually reinforcing patterns of inequality.

Employment, especially outside the household, and education are perhaps the most widely cited determinants of women's empowerment (Caldwell 1982, Goode 1963). While the results have not been uniform, many studies find that a respondent's employment and education are associated with various measures of her autonomy (Balk 1994; Bloom et. al. 2001, Jejeebhoy and Sather 2001). However, it is not clear if employment and education empowers a woman vis-à-vis her husband or her in-laws or both.

Other scholars point also to patriarchal marriage systems that are inherently gender biased as being a primary basis of gender disempowerment. For instance, in many parts of India village exogamy deprives a woman of much of her social networks upon marriage (Desai 1994). Similarly, in the Indian context, frequency of contact with natal kin is a determinant of a female respondent's empowerment (Bloom et. al. 2001). However, it is again not clear if contact with natal kin or the natal village empowers a woman compared to her husband or her in-laws, or both.

Similarly, a large spousal difference in age, common in some arranged marriage systems creates an unequal conjugal relationship. These practices have thus been seen as disempowering women vis-a-vis their husbands. But young brides are also less able to stand up to their in-laws so age at marriage should also be correlated with the power of others in the household.

The determinants of generational power stem from relative differences in wealth, health and authority structures in kinship systems. Inter-generational transfers of wealth have been found to help empower the elder generation over the younger (Maxwell 1986, Williams and Domingo 1993). This is especially true of rural joint families where ancestral land is the primary source of livelihood. The married sons and their families live and work on the family land and until they inherit, the older members generally have more power. On the other hand, nuclear families, that are more common among households with wage and salaried workers or laborers may not experience generational inequality to quite the same degree.

Health is also important for generational inequalities. The increasing dependence of the older generation as they become frail and sick with age may result in empowering the younger generation (Williams and Domingo 1993). Not only are the elderly members in the family unable to do all the hard work on the farm, their failing health makes them dependent on their sons and daughters in law for care and sometimes survival.

Finally, kinship systems subsume within them positions of power that are often based upon an interaction of both gender and generational factors. Thus, while the role of the mother-in-law vis-à-vis the daughter-in-law is one based on generational difference, the domains that she may have relative power over, may be clearly gendered. For instance, if the mother in law is present in the household, she may have a primary say in decisions with respect to cooking for the family as cooking is perceived as a woman's domain. Similarly, if having sons empowers a woman, as often established in ethnographic and demographic literature, this is because the basis of inequality lies in a preference for the male child to carry on the lineage (Kishor, 1993). In both these cases, there is an interaction of gender and generation.

Data and Methods

In 2004-2005, the University of Maryland and the National Council of Applied Economic Research designed and fielded a survey of 40,000 Indian households. The India Human Development Survey, 2004-2005, was conducted throughout India – in 25 states and Union Territories – and included urban as well rural areas.

One part of the survey in each household was an interview with an ever-married woman between the ages of 15 and 49. She was asked about five areas of decision-making in the household and three aspects of a woman's freedom of movement (see Table 1). This module is patterned after a similar module in the SWAF surveys. For each decision, the woman indicated whether she, her husband, a senior male, a senior female, or someone else had a say in that decision. Thus, responses to these questions are statistically independent; for example, it is possible for her to report that both her husband and mother-in-law have a say, only one has a say, or neither has a say about a particular decision. After reporting who had some say in the decision, the respondent was asked who had the most say in making that decision.

In addition to this empowerment module, the survey included a wide range of questions about health, fertility history, marriage practices, education, employment and income. The data collection has been funded by grants from the National Institutes of Health.

India presents an interesting country to test the gender vs. generational argument as there is immense variation in gender inequality, family structure and kinship systems. The data we use are unique in that it is the first large national dataset which measures a female respondent's empowerment vis-à-vis her husband and in-laws.

Preliminary Results

Our analysis begins with an examination of the pattern of decision-making responses across the five domains included in the survey, comparing how generation and gender combine to determine the prevailing authority in each domain. We then disaggregate the results between nuclear and joint families to better understand how household composition affects these patterns of responses. The second major section of the analysis then looks at the household correlates of these responses to examine how households vary in the allocation of decision-making authority. We are especially interested in the roles of education, employment, land ownership, exogamy,

health, and age in distinguishing household decision-making. Thus, in the initial analysis our focus is on variation across issue domains; in the second, our focus is on variation across household types.

Preliminary results for 29,000 households from early state data shows a range of decision making patterns across the five decisions. (Great caution should be exercised in interpreting these preliminary results since these data are still in the process of being cleaned). Table 2 presents results for both who has any say and who has the most say in each of the five decisions. For cooking, the respondent herself almost universally has some say in what is cooked and most often she has, in fact, the most say in these decisions. If it is not her say which is dominant, then it is likely to be another senior female who determines cooking.

Senior family members also often have a say, sometimes the most say, in decisions about major purchases, but for these decisions it is senior men and not senior women who have the authority. Similarly, if the decision is made within the respondent's own conjugal pair, it is the husband who makes purchasing decisions. The gender ratios for purchasing are almost the reverse of those for cooking. Decisions about children's marriages are the most likely issue to have important input from senior family members, both men and women. But like decisions about major purchases, senior men are four times as likely as senior women to have the most say about this matter.

Unlike the previous three issues, decisions about sick children, or even the number of children to have, tend to have lower rates of participation by senior family members outside the conjugal pair. For these issues, the husband is the dominant decision maker but less so for decisions about sick children than for decisions about the number of children.

Thus these five types of decisions reveal a substantial range of generational and gender patterns of authority. Cooking is clearly in the female domain just as major purchases and children's marriages are in the male domain. All of these issues tend to have substantial input from senior family members. In contrast, senior family members have less say about the number of children and treatment for sick children, but wives' authority is greater about children's illnesses than about the number of children to have in the first place.

A comparison of decision making in nuclear and joint households helps illustrate the difference between decisions reflecting gendered inequalities and those reflecting more generational inequalities (Table 3). In households where there are two or more married families residing together, the senior females are far more likely to make the decision about cooking on a daily basis rather than in households where the respondent lives only with her husband. Thus, if the respondent is disempowered about cooking, it is based more often on generation than gender.

When we consider decision-making with respect to major purchases, in most extended families the father-in-law or the husband are more likely to be the primary decision makers, while in nuclear families, it is overwhelmingly the husband. This inequality is thus more gendered. The decision regarding number of children is again more gendered than generational because in both kinds of households, it is the husband that seems to be more likely to make the

decision than the respondent. Finally, in the case of deciding about children's marriage partners, both the husband and the senior male in the household have the primary decision making power indicating that the gender effect is strong,

These differences in decision-making patterns illustrate quite clearly that when a woman is disempowered, it is not always by her husband. Sometimes it is by a senior female or senior male in the household. We believe that it is important to distinguish who is disempowering the woman because the determinants and consequences of the female respondent's disempowerment can be quite different depending on who is the disempowering agent. In the next section we examine in which types of households seniors have more authority and in which types of households women make more decisions.

[To be done]

Conclusion:

Women's empowerment has been the focus of a growing body of demographic research. We believe that these results demonstrate that it is useful within this literature to distinguish between gender and generational bases of empowerment.

Table 1: Intra-family Decision Making Questions in the Survey

Instruction: Code all members that have any say	You?	Husband?	Senior Males?	Senior Females?	Other	Who has the most say?
Tell me who in your family decides the following things:						
What to cook on a daily basis?						
Whether to buy an expensive item such as a TV or a fridge?						
How many children to have?						
What to do if a child falls sick?						
To whom your children should marry?						

Source: Human Development Profile of India 2004-2005

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