Thinking About, Measuring, and Analyzing Women’s Empowerment/Autonomy: Lessons from a Cross-Country Comparative Study

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Introduction

• For going on 20 years, we have worked together and with more than a dozen collaborators on a five-country study of women’s autonomy and fertility behavior. (The five countries were Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines.)

• This study used a conventional survey design, albeit one informed by the precept that gender relations are systemic as well as individual, i.e., we incorporated variation in the independent variable at the community and country as well as household level (Smith 1989).

• The study was designed to test the idea that empowering women leads to lower fertility.

• The results suggest to us that (a) measurement problems make reaching any conclusions about causal processes extremely difficult at the individual level (although we would not have been able to reach this conclusion without the study’s comparative design); and (b) what we and others have been to learn brings into question the blanket supposition that women’s empowerment reduces fertility.

Measuring power relations: why is this so difficult?

• As the words “empowerment” and “autonomy” suggest, gender relations are at their core relations of power and authority.

• In surveys, we attempt to measure these relations through self-reports on such matters as who makes decisions in the household, the freedom or lack thereof of household members to interact in extra-domestic physical or social “spaces,” the extent to which household members control resources, and the extent to which some household members apply threatening or openly coercive social controls over other household members.

• This makes sense conceptually, but a bottom line result from our study is that we have very little confidence that we are measuring the power divide between males and females in a meaningful way through such individual-level measures: Our measures of women’s autonomy or
empowerment have poor measurement characteristics (Ghuman, Lee, and Smith 2001) and the relationship of these measures to other variables tends to differ from community to community—something we know, by the way, because we conducted a comparative study. Nevertheless, this variability in relationships across communities raises the question of whether we have measured power successfully—or, an equally alarming prospect from the point of view of the empowerment hypothesis, whether gender relations have widely varying implications for reproductive behavior across seemingly similar communities.

Because this is not the first study to have reached the conclusion that measuring power differentials between males and females with surveys is extremely tricky, it raises the general question of why measuring power relations through surveys is so difficult. We suggest the basic reason for this is that power is complicated at both the level of on-the-ground reality and at the level of measurement:

1. On-the-ground: As results from an enormous ethnographic literature and our own surveys suggest, women may be empowered in some areas while being completely oppressed in others.

2. In measurement: Power is most readily observed in situations of conflict—and not only is it often difficult or uncomfortable for people to remember or report on domestic conflicts; their views of those conflicts are likely to reflect their role in it, meaning that the portrait of the conflicts and their outcomes is likely to depend on who is asked to report.

The first of these observations about the multidimensional nature of power relations suggests that we need a more sophisticated theory of gender and the fertility transition that can identify the specific forms of power or autonomy needed to lower fertility.

The second observation suggests to many observers that we might be better off abandoning surveys and instead relying on participant observer methodologies in which we can witness and understand situations of domestic conflict. Although this approach has its own intuitive appeal, we note that relating participant observations to large-scale demographic change is extremely difficult. So, before we send a new generation of demographic students to ethnography school, we need to step back and ask whether it is important to measure women’s autonomy or empowerment at the individual level in the first place.

**Is it worth measuring women’s autonomy?**

Based on what we have been able to learn thus far, there is good reason to think that women’s autonomy is only occasionally a force for fertility decline—and that worrying about how to measure autonomy at the individual level may therefore not be worth the effort involved.
• One of the more striking and enduring results in the fertility literature is the close agreement between husbands and wives in most developing countries about how many children to have and whether to use contraception (Mason and Smith 2000; Mason and Taj 1988).

• If women’s autonomy is important for fertility decline because it leads them to want to limit their fertility and gives them the freedom to act on this desire regardless of how their husband feels, then we would expect to see fairly large husband-wife differences rather than the small ones observed in most settings.

• To be sure, there are settings where such differences are large. Most of these, we speculate, are transitional settings in which the forces of modernization are beginning to be felt and, for whatever reason, are being felt more quickly by women than by men or vice-versa.

• In these situation, when it is women who are the more eager to limit fertility, then their autonomy or power may indeed have an impact on how quickly fertility declines.

• We also speculate that gender relations at the systemic or macro level may be implicated in fertility change or at least jointly endogenous with it. Societies that promote greater equality between males and females may also tend to promote better reproductive health and family planning services, something that may explain why, in the five country data, country differences in women’s empowerment and fertility desires or contraceptive use tend to track each other fairly consistently.

• We believe that the bulk of the evidence accumulated to date, however, suggests that women’s empowerment and the change in gender relations it implies is itself an endogenous feature of “modernization” processes—and that it is these “modernization” processes (e.g., the growth of universal schooling, the rise of consumerism) which are the engine of the fertility transition.

• This message will be anathema to many, because they feel that we need to justify attention to women’s empowerment in demographic terms. This raises the question:

Is it worth concerning ourselves with women’s empowerment?

• Yes, we think it is worth concerning ourselves with women’s empowerment. But we think it is dangerous to justify this attention on the basis of demographic outcomes. Women’s empowerment is a matter of basic human rights. Women and girls have as much right to a life of dignity and freedom from want as men and boys have. In the many parts of the world where they are denied equal dignity and resources, we need to work to empower them. This is true regardless of whether empowering women will reduce fertility or cause other demographic changes.
The next leap for demography is therefore recognizing gender equality as an issue worthy of investigation in its own right rather than strictly as a possible engine of demographic change (Presser 2000). We need, in other words, to focus far more attention on the question of how changes in demographic regimes affect gender relations than on the reverse causal pathway. We hope this become a focus for study among population scientists in the 21st century.

References


