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Education, Economic Participation, and Women's Status in India
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Overview

The concern with women's status worldwide has often focused on the regularity with which women occupy the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy and the impact that formal education can potentially have on improving women's social condition. However, despite the increasing attention that is paid to women's status in social scientific research, much remains to be understood about this complex concept. Furthermore, while the level of formal education has been shown to improve some aspects of women's status, education curiously has no impact on others. Some of the seeming inconsistency in these findings may be explained by the fact that we still have much to learn about women's status and how to properly define it. We also still have much to learn about education and exactly what female schooling does for women. In what contexts does schooling lead to higher measures of status? In what contexts is it apparently unrelated to status? What can we learn about these contexts that helps us to understand both women's status and the nature of formal education more completely? Does it matter if a woman is involved in economic activity outside of her home? That is to say, if a woman plays more than a domestic role in her family, is she able to occupy a higher place in the hierarchy of family members than if she was only involved in domestic activities? These are some of the questions that this project seeks to answer. This objective is carried out by studying women in India, a place where considerable emphasis continues to be placed on women's domestic role. Traditional measures of women's status are analyzed along with measures of women's education, employment experience, and socio-demographic characteristics, recorded in the second installment of the National Family Health Survey collected in India in 1998-1999. The responses of women who participated in focus group discussions and interviews, in Goa and Mumbai, India in 2002-2003 concerning their experiences with formal education and its impact on their status are also analyzed in order to more fully understand the nuances in the relationship between education and status.

Theoretical Background

To date, large scale surveys that have sought to collect data on women's status have measured decision making in the household, access to and control over material resources, and the experience of physical violence. Though they can be considered the behavioral outcomes of power, these variables do not directly examine the underlying structural determinants of power and how power resources are unequally divided between men and women. Because power resources are unequally divided, the chances of winning negotiations when they occur are less likely for women than for men. The unequal distribution of power leads to women's social and economic disadvantage, but empirically speaking we know relatively little of how power dynamics play out.

Socio-demographic understandings of women's status thus far have grown out of studies of what Lukes has called manifest forms of power. Komter (1989) discusses Lukes' characterization of power as operating in three dimensions. Manifest power demonstrates the interests of the dominant party in behavior that gives preference to those interests. Decision making, for example, is a visible measure of manifest power in that decisions are actively made to serve the dominant party's interests. Latent power, on the other hand, deals with non-decisions. Latent or overt challenges to the interests of the dominant party are neutralized when the subordinate party anticipates the dominant interests, anticipates a negative reaction to challenging those interests, and resigns her or himself to behavior that heads off any potential conflict (Komter, 1989). Latent power is not directly observable in the way that manifest power is. Take, for example, the hypothetical case in which a married woman states that she chose not to engage in paid employment after she was married. Simply measuring whose decision it was that she not be employed would not reveal if it was her own wish to not work or if she was anticipating that working would go against the wishes of those who had power over her, and in trying to avoid conflict with them, she herself made the decision not to work. In other words, who made the decision of her not working would not reveal the underlying distribution of power.

Whereas the subordinate party is at least aware that her or his interests are in conflict with those of the dominant party when latent power is in play, invisible power, Lukes' third power dimension, constitutes those social and psychological mechanisms that keep both dominant and subordinate individuals from questioning or recognizing any discrepancy of interests. Komter (1989) further elucidates this scenario by discussing Gramsci's work on ideological hegemony, the gradually achieved consensus between dominant and subordinate groups marked by universal approval of values, symbols, beliefs, and opinions that privilege dominant interests. It is a misnomer to say that subordinates are acting of their own free will in such a scenario because in fact ideological hegemony only allows action that serves the will of the dominant. Again, measuring observable behavior will not tap the dynamic of invisible power. Rather, Lukes has suggested thinking in terms of counterfactuals or what the subordinate party would have done (or not done) if the dominant party did not have power over her or him. Komter further suggests that when studying gender inequality, one look for gender differences in mutual and self esteem and in perceptions of legitimations of everyday reality as these provide a window into the social psychology at the root of invisible power, the effects of which those involved are generally unaware (Komter, 1989).

Though most socio-demographic work concerning women's status has been limited to the measurement and analysis of manifest forms of power, scholars have engaged, on a theoretical level at least, in discussions of the broader paradigm of gender power dynamics and its potential for informing our understanding of the determinants of the status of women. In her 1970 review piece, Safilios-Rothschild recounts the pervasiveness of decision making variables in studies of family power. These studies have tended to ignore what Safilios-Rothschild identifies as the other important components of family power along with decision making: patterns of conflict and tension management and the division of labor (1970:540). Even as far as decision making is concerned, the phases of reasoning through options towards making a decision, efforts by one individual to influence the decision of another, who makes the effort and how, how often these efforts are successful all describe power dynamics but are not typically measured. Moreover, the way decision making is typically assessed does not account for the relative importance or value placed on various decisions in the family and does not measure the relative input of family members in supposedly joint decisions.

Working within the paradigm of manifest power and with the traditional survey design that measures women's decision making authority and mobility, more recent studies of women's status have tried to look more critically at these variables and map the multiple constructs they may represent. Examples include Balk (1997), Malhotra and Mather (1997), and Rahman and Rao (2004).

The findings of the Balk (1997), Malhotra and Mather (1997), and Rahman and Rao (2004) all indicate that women do not necessarily experience freedom of mobility and authority in household decisions concomitantly. Rather it is more useful in interpreting these results to think about women's activities in terms of those that support women's traditional domestic roles versus those that somehow challenge or redefine those roles. Understanding the local context is essential in realizing why women have authority over some household decisions but not others and why they can travel freely to some destinations but not others. It seems possible, when considering these analyses as well as Oropesa's (1997) and Menon's (2003) findings of greater physical violence against working wives, that gains in authority or access to resources in one area of women's lives can be correlated with being controlled in other aspects of their lives. What is the bottom line or the sum total of their status, then? It is difficult to answer this question when only measuring manifest or observed behavioral forms of power. We would need to examine latent and invisible power as well to measure competing interests, how dominant and subordinate individuals negotiate conflict, and how people are affected by ideological hegemony that is expected to privilege males. It is a widely held belief that representative samples and quantitative analyses allow generalizability in results and that qualitative studies allow greater theoretical depth in interpretation. With well developed sources of the former and limited sources of the latter, socio-demographic work should continue the trend of sorting through the multiple constructs of women's status that it seems to be measuring in large scale surveys while working towards expanding the use of in-depth qualitative studies.

The present study attempts to do just that by analyzing the experience of women in India. The Indian context has been subject to the types of processes that are expected to have an impact on women's status. Economic development has been built on an underlying and enduring patriarchal culture. The majority of the population continues to live in rural areas organized by agricultural production. However, rapid economic development during the past fifty years and an expanding market economy have increased non-farm work among women and men. An educational reform movement that precedes independence has stressed the importance of educating females but without systematically challenging the primacy of their roles as wives and mothers. In fact there is very little that is systematic about Indian education and very little research on how formal schooling can both empower women and maintain traditional gender roles, though that is what it is implicitly expected to do. Though India has seen a steady fall in fertility levels and family size, marriage is nearly universal, and generally women's lives are organized around marriage and motherhood first and, if applicable, education and work only after family considerations have been satisfied. Moreover, India is a highly stratified society, not only in terms of an entrenched caste system among the majority Hindu population, but also, and perhaps more relevant with respect to material considerations, in terms of socioeconomic class. All of these conditions suggest a context wherein the multiple constructs of women's status, namely the various dimensions of gender and class based power, challenges to this power inside and outside the home, and responses to these challenges, are likely to be in effect. Though all the dynamics of women's status are not directly observable, this study focuses on two popular measures of women's status, their education and economic activity, around which the potential for understanding women's status in all its complexity is explored.

Quantitative Study

Data for the quantitative analyses are drawn from the second installment of the cross-sectional National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2), part of the Demographic Health Survey series, collected in India in 1998-1999. Because many of the outcome measures of interest include response options that assess respondents' husbands' involvement in household decisions, the original sample of 90,303 women is limited to those women who are currently married, giving a final sample size of 84,532 women (94 % of the original sample).

Dependent Variables - A series of questions were asked of NFHS-2 respondents that relate to the status they hold in their families. Responses to these questions point to the degree of autonomy women experience when making decisions, their access to monetary resources, their control over monetary resources in the form of their own earnings, and the social control that is exerted over them in terms of freedom of movement outside the home and physical violence.

Independent Variables - Items that relate to respondents' education, work activity, standard of living, age, marriage, fertility, and household structure are used as explanatory variables in predicting status outcomes. Education measures include level of formal schooling, degree of exposure to media forms (television, radio, newspaper, and cinema), and spouses' relative levels of formal schooling. Employed women are also examined as to the impact of work related variables (payment form, work location, employer, and contribution to family income) on status outcomes.

Methodology - The NFHS-2 does not record the relative importance within families of the various decisions about which it asks. Neither does it record the degree of involvement of various individuals in jointly made decisions. Therefore, each decision making item, and indeed each status measure under consideration in the multivariate analyses, is treated separately. This approach also allows a more in depth look at each status measure and how it compares to the others. With respect to the five measures that assess involvement in decision making, the response options are recoded to three responses that indicate whether decisions were made solely by the respondent, by the respondent with others, or by others without the respondent. Each of these responses, as well as the responses of the other status measures is treated as a nominal category so as to avoid making any assumptions about which responses imply higher status among this population of respondents. Consequently, the data are fit to models of generalized logits.

Qualitative Study

Four focus groups and one interview were conducted in Mumbai as well as in Goa from November 2002 to February 2003 for a total of eight group discussions and two individual interviews. Women were informed that the project was a study of women's status in India, specifically how it is affected by education, and discussions were semi-structured with several questions that focused on this theme.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results point to positive effects of formal schooling on increasing women's autonomy and access to money and decreasing the social control imposed on them. While being formally employed reduces some of the significance of a woman's level of schooling, the NFHS-2 data also suggest other ways in which women's autonomy and freedom are affected. Much has been made of the detrimental effects of high fertility on women's lives. The effect of total number of births in these data supports this conclusion, but the effect of living number of sons and daughters in most cases increases women's autonomy and access to money and reduces their experience of being socially controlled. Furthermore, in a few instances when the number of sons is not significant, the number of daughters exerts positive effects on women's autonomy in deciding to go and stay with their parents or siblings, on working women going to the market, and on women in the general married population not being beaten. While living children and the number of sons has been suggested as a means by which women gain status in their families, the current findings also suggest that daughters can have a positive impact on women's lives. Though the data are not structured to specifically answer this question, one possible interpretation that warrants further study is that daughters, by sharing women's domestic responsibilities, provide opportunities for women to move more freely beyond the home. In any case, while living with more people and living in an extended family evidently restrict women's autonomy and freedoms, her own living children do not show this effect.

The effect of a greater positive age gap between spouses on improving the odds of women's autonomy in decision making and of improving employed women's freedom of movement and access to money, and the effect of similar levels of schooling in reducing the odds of women's autonomy in deciding to go and stay with their parents and siblings and increasing the odds of their being beaten suggest that parity between spouses can in some instances have negative effects on women's lives. Again, the data are not structured to confirm any hypotheses that would explain these results, but it is possible that parity in age and education among spouses leads to lives that are more generally intertwined which could in turn lead to less autonomy among women and greater opportunity for conflict. This explanation runs against the theory that parity in age and education among spouses promotes more favorable outcomes for women as far as the balance of household power is concerned.

The enduring importance of women's domestic roles, regardless of their education or work status, is indicated by both quantitative and qualitative results to date. These preliminary results suggest that while certain factors may provide opportunities for women to expand the scope of their activities they do not function to fundamentally alter the primacy of women's domestic roles and identities. Lower class women who participated in group discussions focused most often on the importance of education in giving women some economic insurance when the income of other family members was insufficient or in the case of abandonment. Middle class women focused more often on the importance of education in improving women's self confidence and giving them a chance to earn some spending money for themselves. None of the women suggested that schooling or work presented alternatives to marriage or motherhood or challenged the privileges to which male members of their families were accustomed. Schooling and work were discussed as means by which to make women's lives more comfortable without upsetting the status quo of male privilege.

Further analyses will seek to describe a more thorough profile of the constructs captured by the NFHS-2 status measures, identify the household power dynamics discussed by focus group and interview respondents, and advocate an agenda for future studies of women's status.