

Explaining Women's Autonomy in Egypt: The Role of Household Location and Context

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Past work and theory suggests that certain individual level determinants affect women's autonomy. However, some research poorly defines and differentiates between women's status, autonomy, and power. The tendency to use proxy measures of women's status like education and employment to measure autonomy make it difficult to discern what events in the life course affect autonomy or a woman's sense of control. The recognition that certain events in the life course, like educational achievement, are important in shaping women's status and autonomy has given rise to studies examining the relationship between individual characteristics and women's autonomy, but household effects on women's autonomy have yet to receive the needed research attention. Little research shows what household or community determinants affect autonomy, which determinants are most important, and at what level. Evidence suggests that gender-based research should examine women's status and autonomy within the context of women's lives to clarify the pathways that account for the differences observed.

There is even less understanding of how the household environment affects women's autonomy in Middle Eastern and North African countries. Egypt is a unique study context to explore women's autonomy as the social and economic structure is changing. While female education has been improving, there have been marked declines in female labor force participation. Egypt has the largest, most densely settled population among the Arab countries. In an opinion poll of gender experts on women's rights worldwide in November 2013, Egypt was ranked as the worst country in the Arab world to be a woman, ranking worse than Iraq and Afghanistan. While in Egypt, households are the primary operating unit with many families living in extended family structures, little is known about how the household context affects women. This study looks at how the context and location of women's households in Egypt affect their autonomy or personal sense of control.

Methods

Data from the Egyptian Labor Market Panel Survey (ELMPS) is well suited for the research proposed here. The ELMPS is a nationally representative panel survey of households in Egypt. The ELMPS was designed to study socioeconomic attributes of households. It includes data on both individuals, households, and communities at three points in time: Wave 1 data were collected in 1998, Wave 2 data were collected in 2006, and Wave 3 data were collected in 2012. All data were self-reported during a face-to-face interview conducted by a trained field interviewer. The final sample consists of 6,596 women who were ever married and between the ages of 15 and 49 in 2006.

Household characteristics like wealth, size, extended family structure, whether there is a female head of household, urban/rural, and region of residence are included in the analysis. Autonomy is measured with five different variables. Mobility is a continuous measure operationalized based on 4 items. Household decision-making is captured with two continuous variables that consider individual decision-making and joint decision-making, both 10-item scales. Intimate partner violence attitudes is a 7-item scale assessing attitudes towards intimate partner violence, and gender role attitudes is an 11-item continuous scale about the role of

women in households. Multilevel ordinary least squares regression models estimate the effects of household characteristics on women's autonomy.

Results

The average age of sample respondents is 32 years and 94% are still married. The average age at first marriage is around 21 years old. About 30% of women are related to their husbands, most commonly as first cousins. The average duration between being engaged and formal marriage is 14.1 months. While 40.1% of the sample respondents did not receive a dowry, 33.4% received some amount of dowry. About half the sample of women have at least a traditional or technical secondary education. Sixty-nine percent of the women report ever being employed.

For the household location and context, 48% of the women live in rural areas currently, while 50% lived in rural areas at birth. The average size of the household is 5.22 members. A quarter of the sample of women live in rural lower Egypt and a quarter live in rural upper Egypt. Only 14% are in the greater Cairo area. Households are fairly evenly distributed across assets/wealth categories with a fifth falling into each category. Heads of household are typically male as there are only 7% of household with female heads. Forty-five percent of the women report living with extended family.

On average, the husbands are 39 years old with a 7-year age difference with wives. Approximately 50% of the men have higher than a secondary education. The average difference in years of education between the husbands and their wives is 3 years. Close to 100% of men report ever working, and 96% report being employed in 2006. About 88% of the sample is in a permanent position of employment. Only 7% of men have migrated for work.

Women feel anywhere between indifferent to average to the statements regarding gender norms (Mean=3.75, SD=.556). However, there is significant variation and responses range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In general, respondents have a low amount of personal control in mobility decisions, with the average score equivalent to a response between "need permission" and "just inform them" (Mean=2.35, SD=.670) and the modal response is 2, indicating that most women need permission to go outside of the home. For attitudes towards domestic violence, respondents have slightly negative attitudes with the average score indicating agreement that a husband is justified in beating his wife on at least a couple items since higher scores indicate a greater belief in domestic violence (Mean=1.96, SD=2.03). In general, respondents have a low amount of personal power in household decisions, with the average score for respondents participating in household decisions equivalent to participating on only two to three decisions (Mean=2.59, SD=2.50). That said, there is still variation with scores ranging from 0 to 10. For respondents and somebody else participating in household decisions, there is still a low yet slightly higher amount of participation with the average score equivalent to participating in three to four decisions (Mean=3.28, SD=2.03).

Results show that across every outcome and model, the variance in women's autonomy is due to differences between regions. Among the household characteristics, the current region of the household is related most consistently to women's autonomy and power. Since the region variable is a combination of the women's location and the urbanicity of that location, it shows that women in rural upper Egypt are consistently associated with less autonomy and power compared to women in Greater Cairo, all else held constant. In fact, women in rural upper Egypt have a quarter of a point lower mobility, a half a point higher belief in domestic violence, and on average, participate in one less household decision compared to women in Greater Cairo.

Women in Alexandria & the Suez Canal have significantly less positive views towards domestic violence compared to women in Greater Cairo, all else constant. These women also participate in fewer household decisions as compared to women in Cairo.

Household wealth is significantly associated with mobility, domestic violence attitudes, and household decision-making, both individual and joint decisions. As compared to the poorest households, women in the middle wealth households have less mobility and individual participation in decision-making, but also less favorable attitudes towards domestic violence and more joint household decision-making. Women in the richest households also have less favorable attitudes towards domestic violence, less mobility, and less individual participation and more joint participation in household decision-making as compared to women in the poorest households, all else held constant. Household size is only associated with mobility and joint participation in household decisions. All else held constant, those in larger households are less mobile and more frequently participate in joint household decisions. Living in a female headed household is significantly associated with all autonomy and power outcomes except attitudes towards gender norms. As compared to women who are not in a female headed household, those who are have greater mobility, less favorable attitudes towards domestic violence, three times greater participation in individual household decision making, and two times less participation in joint household decisions, all else held constant. As expected, those who live with their extended family are associated with less participation in joint household decisions.

Discussion

Across all autonomy outcomes, region of household, household wealth, and residing in a female-headed household are consistently associated with women's autonomy. As expected, the women in rural upper Egypt, rural lower Egypt, and urban upper Egypt have less autonomy and power as compared to women in the Cairo area. The rural/urban differences in autonomy with women in rural areas being associated with less autonomy and power are also consistent with work that shows more patriarchal views in rural Egypt. Household wealth is an important determinant of women's autonomy. The wealthiest women have less autonomy compared to the poorest women, but this could be due to the measures of autonomy employed and the fact that these women are most likely not doing a lot of household tasks.

This study makes significant contributions to the research on household dynamics in Egypt. This study is one of the first to describe the household determinants of women's autonomy in Egypt, specifically for a sample of ever-married women of reproductive age. Additionally, this research uses a range of measures to operationalize autonomy, recognizing that each captures something different about a woman's experience. Hierarchical linear models indicate that membership in a particular region in Egypt is a determinant of and explains some of the variance in women's autonomy.

Future Directions

The planned study will also utilize the 2012 ELMPS data both as a cross section and as part of the longitudinal analysis of household location and context and women's autonomy over time in transitional Egypt.