

Chapter 4

Explaining Female Autonomy: Developing Hypotheses

Women, like men, are members of several multilevel groupings that constitute society. They are members of regional clusters with associated socioeconomic levels of development and laws, of cultural and religious groups with associated kinship arrangements and accepted norms of behavior, and of households and conjugal units each with its own specific characteristics. And women are also individuals imbued with their own distinctive characteristics. The degree of autonomy desired and exercised by women depends not only on their own characteristics, but is also influenced by the characteristics, practices, and norms of each of the specific groupings of which they are members. It is this intersection of women's multilevel involvement in society with the multilevel influences on their autonomy that needs to be modelled for the specific case of Egyptian women. Specifically, we need to explain the cross-sectional variation in the autonomy of currently married Egyptian women as defined by the indices of customary autonomy, noncustomary autonomy, and realized autonomy.

The EDHS allows us to incorporate into our discussion women's simultaneous membership at the household level,¹ the conjugal unit level, and the individual level. We also know their religious affiliation and their regional membership based on the location of the household to which they belong. We are able to examine two sources of influence on women's autonomy: the modernizing and economic influences on the one hand, and the culture-specific influences embodied in the kinship arrangements to which women are subject, on the other. These influences are assumed to impact directly on each woman through her own characteristics, as well as indirectly through the characteristics of the household of which she is a member and the characteristics of her husband who is the other member of her conjugal unit. Following from the above we divide our discussion into two parts. First, we develop hypotheses pertaining to the modernizing and economic explanations of female autonomy, and then we develop hypotheses that take cultural influences into consideration.

4.1 The Modernization Approach to the Autonomy of Women

The modernization theory of development argues that in the process of modernization, traditional barriers to mobility and self expression break down, giving way to new ways of thinking and doing things (Kuznetz, 1966; Inkeles and Smith, 1974). The traditional emphasis on the maximization of group welfare is replaced by a new emphasis on self-determination and the achievement of individual-level goals (Moore, 1979). Urbanization, the spread of education, and increased exposure to mass media create the need for and facilitate innovative behavior that emphasizes autonomy in thought and action (Lerner, 1958; Moore, 1979).

Since the modernization theory of development does not differentiate between sexes, the underlying assumption appears to be that innovative behavior and the move to individual-level autonomy are not gender specific. The erosion of traditional norms should free both women and men to take control of their own destiny and behave autonomously to maximize their welfare. The modernization process is thus assumed to be one that generates, in all, a need and a capacity for autonomy and self-determination. The processes of industrialization and urbanization, the spread of literacy and communications, as well as widespread exposure

¹A woman could be a member of a household as household head. However, in Egypt female-headed households account for about only 4% of households (Nawar et al.,1994) and only 0.3% of currently married women in the EDHS are household heads. Household headship is potentially an important influence on autonomy. However, because of the statistical insignificance of female-headed households in Egypt, it is not discussed.

to the media have all been identified as vehicles of modernization. The economic development of the region in which the household is located and the socioeconomic status of the household are likely to mediate the extent to which individual members have access to modern education and thought.

These arguments imply that female autonomy is an innovative response to, as well as a consequence of, the processes of modernization and economic development. Thus, we should expect the following:

4.1.1 Area of Residence

Women residing in households located in urbanized, economically developed regions will be more autonomous than women residing in less developed, rural regions.² In the case of Egypt this implies that women in the more developed Lower Egypt should have more autonomy than women in the less developed Upper Egypt, and those in the Urban Governorates and in the urban regions of Lower and Upper Egypt should be more autonomous than those living in rural Upper and Lower Egypt.

4.1.2 Socioeconomic Status of the Household

The higher the socioeconomic status of the household the greater is its potential ability to provide education and media-exposure to its members. The modernization approach equates this potential to the desire to do so. However, increased wealth and socioeconomic status can also enhance the ability of households to fulfill gender norms. If these norms are patriarchal, households may opt not to eliminate gender inequality, but, instead, to increase controls over women and curtail their autonomy. One example of such a response to increases in household socioeconomic status is the withdrawal of female members from the labor force as the wealth of the household increases (Agarwal, 1986).

However, data specific to Egypt suggest that female autonomy, at least as measured by questions on the necessity of the husband's permission, knowledge about women's rights, and association memberships, is positively associated with standard of living (Nawar et al., 1994). Consequently, we hypothesize that controlling for cultural influences on autonomy (discussed below) the socioeconomic status of the household will be positively associated with female autonomy.

4.1.3 Husband's Characteristics

Since a woman is also a member of a conjugal unit, a woman's autonomy can be expected to be affected by the extent of her husband's exposure to modernizing influences. Specifically, the higher the education level of the husband and the greater his involvement in the modern production sector, the greater will be his wife's autonomy.

4.1.4 Individual-level Characteristics

Modernizing influences will affect a woman's autonomy also because they will be embodied in her own education, her employment experience, and her past and present exposure. Past exposure to modernizing influences is important since role socialization generally begins in the formative years. We expect that women who are more highly educated and have had early and continuing exposure to the world outside the home are likely to be more autonomous.

²Egypt is divided into four major regions: Lower Egypt, Upper Egypt, the Urban Governorates, which include the four urban centers of Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and Port Said, and the Frontier Governorates. Lower Egypt accounts for about 43% of the population, Upper Egypt for about 35%, the Urban Governorates for about 20%, and the Frontier Governorates for about 1%. Data are not available in the 1988 EDHS for the Frontier Governorates.

Modernization theory also implies that female labor force participation should translate into greater control over household resources. However, this relationship is likely to be mediated, on the one hand, by a woman's control over her own earnings (Greenhalgh, 1985; Bardhan, 1985; Safilios-Rothschild, 1982), and on the other, by the respect given to a woman who is employed.

In Egypt even a broad measure of labor force participation shows only a maximum of 20% of currently married women of reproductive age as working (Nawar et al., 1994). Women who do work often justify their labor force participation in terms of the economic necessity of helping the family financially (Nawar et al., 1994; Rugh, 1984). This suggests that working outside the home may be more acceptable if it is seen as fulfilling the financial needs of the family.

To the extent that labor force participation is a means to fulfill family economic needs women who work and give their earnings for family use should be accorded a higher status within the home or community than those who earn but keep most of the earnings for themselves. And yet, modernization theory would predict that it is women who are able to dispose of their earnings by themselves are likely to have the greatest autonomy, and women whose labor and earnings are entirely in someone else's control are least likely to gain in autonomy from labor force participation.

Aside from the issue of control over earnings, labor force involvement is likely to enhance a woman's need for autonomy as well as expose her to ideas that emphasize women's autonomy. Indeed, research in some Cairo communities suggests that women who brought in wages were allowed a greater say in financial matters (Hoodfar, 1988). Thus, we hypothesize that working for cash will be positively associated with autonomy; additionally, working women with control over earnings will be more autonomous than those with little control over earnings.

What of women who are employed but do not receive any cash for their work? We are unaware of any research specifically addressing the autonomy of such women. Clearly such work, being unrelated to earnings, is unlikely to directly enhance women's financial autonomy or directly improve the financial welfare of the household. Nevertheless, work paid for in kind (e.g., paid for with food) might help the household by freeing cash resources for alternative uses. Further, even work without cash earnings is likely to require greater freedom of movement for women and should increase their exposure to the world outside the home. Thus, we hypothesize that women working but not earning cash will be less autonomous than women working for earnings, but more so than women not working at all.

Women's exposure to modernization will also be affected by their migration history. Living in many places as distinct from living in only one place will increase the probability of exposure to different belief systems and alternative ways of doing things. In addition, the process of migration involves a break with familiar surroundings and the ability to survive in unfamiliar ones. This suggests that migratory women more than nonmigratory women will need to be more open to change and more resourceful. These characteristics, in turn, are likely to be positively associated with autonomy.

4.2 Culture-dependent Influences on Female Autonomy

The autonomy implied by economic development and modernization theories is likely to be mediated by the kinship structures within which women live and the culture-specific gender and age-stratification systems of which they are a part. Indeed, the degree of women's exposure to modern ideas, their freedom of movement outside the home, their access to modern education, and their involvement in the economic production process will all be guided to a lesser or greater extent by what is considered socially and culturally appropriate for women.

In most predominantly patriarchal societies that emphasize women's dependence on male kin, culturally appropriate behavior for women is not likely to encourage expressions of autonomy of either decision-making or action. Indeed, Dixon-Mueller (1993) describes the "essence" of patriarchy as a system in which "girls and women have little control over the circumstances under which they work, the returns for their labor, their sexuality, and the timing and number of their children" (pg. 25). However, the extent to which the normative assumptions about appropriate female behavior are adhered to are likely to depend on several aspects of the kinship structure, and on how these aspects impinge on women's individual circumstances. Of particular interest are factors that embody patriarchal controls: post-marital residential arrangements, marriage rules, and the roles of female fertility and having sons in woman's status attainment and autonomy. Let us examine each of these factors and hypothesize about its association with female autonomy.

4.2.1 Post-marital residential arrangements

There are two aspects of post-marital residential arrangements that we consider: the nature of the household, i.e., whether it is nuclear or not, and whether the husband's relatives or the wife's relatives are co-resident with the couple.

Women in extended families are likely to be less autonomous than women in nuclear households. There are two arguments favoring this association. First, the two types of households are likely to afford different opportunities for the expression of individual-level autonomy. Extended family living affords a greater opportunity for control of women by others, especially control of new brides and young women who are at the bottom of the gender and age hierarchy (Dixon-Mueller, 1989). Since some of these "others" are likely to be senior women, it is clear that control within the family will be affected not only by gender, but also by age: women being afforded less autonomy than men, and younger women having less power than older women. Similarly, even younger men are afforded less autonomy than older men. By contrast, in a nuclear family the decision-making is much more likely to rest in the hands of the male head, and the next in line is much more likely to be his wife.

Second, reversing the causality, we would expect women and couples who are more autonomous to self-select into forming nuclear households (Caldwell et al., 1988). In other words, women who are more autonomous are less likely to be living in extended or joint families precisely because their autonomy prevents them from living harmoniously in such families. Thus, at any point in time, we would expect a higher proportion of autonomous women living in nuclear households than in non-nuclear ones. This suggestion is borne out in part by data that show that married Egyptian women in nuclear households are much less likely to be illiterate, and much more likely to have had self-arranged marriages than married women living in extended families (Nawar et al., 1994). Thus, on both counts, we hypothesize that women in extended families are more likely than those in nuclear families to be autonomous.

Even if women are not living in extended households, intergenerational obligations often imply that aging parents live with their married children. Patriarchal kinship structures emphasize the intergenerational responsibilities of males to their natal kin rather than those of females (Dyson and Moore, 1983). While this implies that the husband's parents are more likely than the woman's kin to reside with the conjugal couple, it also means that in households that contain a woman's in-laws, patriarchal traditions are more likely to be enforced. Further, it is more likely that a woman in such a household is in a more subordinate position than a woman in a household in which her own parents are co-resident or in which there is no kin co-resident. We can therefore expect women living in households with in-laws present to be less autonomous than those living in households with no kin or their own kin present.

4.2.2 Marriage

Marriage arrangements can affect a woman's autonomy because they impact on who she marries, the age at which she marries, and the ease with which she can dissolve her marriage or get remarried. Whereas the first of these factors affects her conjugal-level membership, the others will enhance or reduce her autonomy through her individual-level characteristics.

Marriage to a relative, a fairly common practice in Egypt, has been associated with a lower status for women in Muslim countries (Moghadam, 1992). In Egypt being married to a relative is positively correlated with being married very young, being illiterate, and being married to a person selected by others (Nawar et al., 1994). These findings lead us to expect that women who are married to kin will be less autonomous than women not married to kin.

A higher age at marriage and autonomy have been found to be positively correlated (Safilios-Rothschild, 1985), with causality running both ways (Mason, 1987; Standing, 1983; Cochrane, 1983; Smith, 1983). Consequently, we would expect that age at marriage would be positively associated with a woman's autonomy.

Rates of divorce have been found to be higher where women have access to, and control over, resources (Ackerman, 1964; Hull, 1977; Havens, 1973). Nevertheless, United Nations data reveal that countries with more egalitarian gender systems that accord equal rights of divorce to men and women can have rates of divorce similar to countries that have extremely inegalitarian gender systems that make it easier for men than women to divorce (United Nations, 1984). Consequently, it cannot be assumed that a high rate of divorce reflects a higher level of female autonomy; a high rate of divorce can also result from women's subordinate legal and social position so that a woman can be easily divorced.

In Egypt, recourse to divorce appears to differ by gender, so that it is easier for men than women to divorce (Naguib, 1994). In most cases, men do not need to petition a court, but can obtain a divorce simply by repudiating their wives three times. Women, on the other hand, must expend a large amount of time and money and go through a court.

The data we have in the EDHS are not on divorce, but on whether women have been remarried. Keeping in mind that remarriage can occur following a divorce or widowhood, what can be said about the relative autonomy of remarried women? Our discussion does not suggest a direct association between being divorced and the autonomy of a woman in Egypt. Nonetheless, we expect that a woman who has experienced the dissolution of a marriage (for whatever reason), and has entered into another, is more likely to require and display greater control over her life than a woman who has not had this experience.

4.2.3 Number of children and son preference

At the macro level, regions of low female autonomy are also regions where fertility is high (Dyson and Moore, 1983). One explanation of this is that for a woman living in a patriarchal household, children, especially sons, are likely to help secure her position in her husband's home and improve her status (Blake, 1965; Wolf, 1972; Dixon, 1975; Caldwell, 1986). However, this explanation also implies that women who are more autonomous initially, or those whose circumstances allow them to be more autonomous, are less likely to need children or sons as props to their status.

Even when children are needed to acquire status, it is not clear whether a greater *number* of children will enhance autonomy more than a lesser number. Also, although the literature has emphasized the

importance of sons, we do not know whether a larger number of daughters will leave a woman's autonomy unaffected or reduce it.

In Egypt, the cultural tradition does stress the importance of male children, but this emphasis translates into only a moderate level of son preference (Cleland et al., 1983). Women in Egypt appear not to be as completely devoid of other sources of status or security as women in some South Asian regions where patrilocal village exogamy leaves married women isolated among strangers. In these regions, the practice of exogamy has been found to be associated with extreme son preference (Kishor, 1992a, 1992b). Indeed, ethnographic and empirical data reveal that women in Egypt tend to live near their families of origin, often receive some personal property at marriage and compensation in case of divorce, and can accept help from a daughter as a last resort (Makinson, 1986, 1987). These factors, combined with the fact that autonomous women are also the ones who are less likely to need a large number of children as security, yield the following hypothesis: The number of sons will be positively, though moderately, related to female autonomy, and the number of daughters will be unrelated to autonomy.

The hypotheses developed so far have not specifically differentiated between the impact of modernization and cultural influences on the different aspects of autonomy. In addition to the over-all effect of these factors, we are interested in the relative difference in their impact on the three different dimensions of autonomy as measured by the indices of customary autonomy, noncustomary autonomy and realized autonomy. We have noted that high scores on the customary autonomy index are typical among Egyptian women but are the exception on the noncustomary autonomy index. This suggests that the belief that women should influence decision-making in the domestic sphere is more likely to be the norm, and the belief that women should have influence in decision-making in the non-domestic sphere is more likely to be reflective of innovative thinking. If this is the case, we can expect that the model of autonomy we have developed will better explain variations in noncustomary autonomy than in customary autonomy. Note, however, that the stronger normative basis of customary autonomy also implies that variation in levels of the customary autonomy index should be observed across groups between which the norm itself differs.

The impact of modernizing influences and kinship structures is likely to also differ between the indices that reflect women's opinions about women's decision-making roles, on the one hand, and realized autonomy, on the other. For one, realized autonomy is likely to be more influenced by practical considerations: for example, a woman who works outside the home is likely to need and get more freedom of movement not necessarily because she may desire it more, but because working outside the home requires her to have it. Further, the realized autonomy of women is the most visible form of all the forms of autonomy being considered. In patriarchal societies the status of the entire household can rest on the behavior of women. Thus, kinship structures are likely to reinforce traditional norms about behavior. Consequently, the transformation of exposure to modernizing influences into "modern" behavior by the individual woman may also be more difficult under patriarchal kinship arrangements. Thus, we expect kinship arrangements to play a greater role, and individual-level factors to play a lesser role, in explaining variation in realized autonomy as compared with the other dimensions of autonomy, especially noncustomary autonomy.