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Shared agency: The dominant spouse's impact on education expenditure

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Summary. — In this paper, we consider whether it is the gender of the decision maker or the extent of agency that they wield that is crucial to increasing household welfare. This is an important question as development policy is often formed on the basis that placing resources in the hands of women results in greater household welfare. Indonesia provides the ideal opportunity to study this issue because it is home to ethnic groups with very different gender norms from male dominance (the patrilineal Batak) to female dominance (the matrilineal Minangkabau). Using IFLS data for three rounds, we consider the impact of decision-making by the dominant spouse on household expenditure on education. We find that, in Indonesia, when the dominant spouse (male or female) has sole control of decision-making, there is an overall negative impact on education expenditure. This leads us to argue that it is more important to consider the issue of spousal dominance, than to wholly focus on gender.

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Key words — gender, agency, household decision-making, Indonesia, ethnicity

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we study the impact that unequal agency within a household has on a particular aspect of household welfare, expenditure on education. There is a large literature that argues that household welfare is improved when mothers have more agency within the household (see for example Rahman, 2013; Agarwal, 1997; de la Briere, Hallman, & Quisumbing, 2003; Duflo, 2012; Quisumbing & Maluccio, 1999; Rahman, Mostofa, & Hoque, 2014; Seebens & Sauer, 2007). Since this literature is predicated on the dominant patriarchal, patrilineal model of households, these results have been interpreted to mean that increasing women's agency will improve household welfare. This leaves open the issue of whether it is gender which is important or an increase in agency for the less dominant spouse (men in matrilineal societies and women in patrilineal societies). This is what we analyze in this paper using data from Indonesia.

Indonesia provides the ideal opportunity to study this issue because it is home to ethnic groups with very different gender norms (Blackburn, 2004) ranging from the patrilineal (Batak) to the bilateral (Javanese) and the matrilineal (Minangkabau). The Indonesia Family Life Survey (IFLS), which we use in this paper, provides information at the household and community level allowing us to analyze the impact of agency within the household across a range of kinship systems. In this context, we consider whether there is any symmetry between the agency wielded by the 'weaker' partner among the patrilineal Batak (women) and the matrilineal Minangkabau (men). We ask whether women are less powerful than men in making certain decisions even within the matrilineal Minangkabau. We also ask whether the power wielded by the dominant spouse has different impacts across these groups. Our results indicate that cooperation between the partners is more beneficial in Indonesia than enhancing the power of either parent in the household, particularly where that parent is already powerful. Our findings confirm those of Basu and Ray (2002) who found that, in the context of child labor, household welfare was greatest in households where both parents were equally powerful.

Our paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, while there is a lot of research on women's agency in developing countries, there is much less on shared agency

between spouses. There is also less literature analyzing the agency wielded by men when they are the 'weaker' partner. This is not surprising, given that many systems across the world are patrilineal and patriarchal. In this paper, we use the different kinship systems in Indonesia to study the impact of agency (of both men and women) on household expenditure on education and the heterogeneity of this agency across communities.

Secondly, our analysis enables us to explicitly consider the role of female decision-making and compare it with that of men. There is some evidence (Ashraf, 2009; Gneezy, Leonard, & List, 2009) that there are parallels among women in matrilineal societies and men in patrilineal societies. Ashraf (2009), for instance, finds that "women whose husbands control the savings decisions in the household behave as the men whose wives control the savings decision" (p. 1247). In the context of a country like Indonesia where there is greater balance with regard to agency between men and women, such an analysis is likely to be especially revealing.

Our third contribution is methodological. The study of women's agency has, until recently, used indirect proxies like the relative income, the relative education, or the relative age of spouses as a proxy for the power they wield in making decisions within the household (Anderson & Eswaran, 2009; Felkey, 2013; Quisumbing, 2003). More recently, with the popularity of the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) datasets, researchers have measured women's agency through responses to questions about their freedom to move outside the home, their ability to make decisions regarding child health or their acceptance of violence from partners (for example Agarwal, 1997; Aizer, 2010; Jejeebhoy, 2002). While the DHS measures are very revealing of autonomy in some contexts, they have been criticized for ignoring the increased responsibility that such freedoms entail for women. Basu and Koolwal (2005), for instance, argue that the real measure of autonomy is not whether women have the freedom to do certain things but what would happen if a woman chose to ignore these freedoms. In particular, they conclude that true freedom requires some measure of self-indulgence and the

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freedom to do relatively unproductive things (listen to radio, visit friends) and to set aside money for personal use, for example. In this paper, we use a different, more direct agency measure—the decisions made by men and women across different domains within the household. While other researchers (Anderson & Eswaran, 2009; Fernandez, Della Giusta, & Kambhampati, 2015; Garikipati, 2008; Rammohan & Johar, 2009) have used this measure, it is relatively underused despite providing us with a direct measure of the impact that female agency has on the quality of decisions within the household.

We structure our paper as follows. We begin with a review of the literature that we draw on, focusing on the concepts of agency, gender, and ethnicity in Section 2. We then describe our data and methodology in Section 3 before moving on to the results in Section 4 and the discussion in Section 5.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

(a) *Gender and agency*

In this paper, we focus on a particular form of power, agency, which refers to an individual's ability to act on a goal deemed to be important (Iversen, 2003; Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1985, 2001) and to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999). We measure agency by analyzing decisions made within households.

Unlike the early unitary models (see Becker, 1974, 1981), it is now commonly accepted that a household is not a unitary entity governed by a single decision-maker. Household interactions seldom take the binary form of either cooperation or discord which is central to many bargaining models because “the simultaneity of cooperation and conflict in gender divisions has often been trivialized in the formal economic literature” (Sen, 1990, p. 131). Sen therefore proposed the idea of cooperative conflict, where household members cooperate (and thereby add to the total resources available to the household) and experience conflict (the process of dividing these resources) (Sen, 1987b, 1990). Of course, there is no single co-operative outcome and a person's ability to bargain (often gendered and affected by perceived contributions to the household) is crucial in how they fare in the co-operative outcome. Within these models, women are seen as more concerned about family welfare than their own (Sen, 1987a).

Sen's co-operative conflict model has been criticized for attributing false consciousness to women (Jackson, 2013). Agarwal (1997) also argues that women identify their personal welfare with that of their husband and children because they are socialized toward meeting collective needs. She illustrates this through a comparison of the matrilineal and patrilineal Khaasi group in India and their patrilineal and patrilineal peers. Experimental evidence (Iversen, Jackson, Kebede, Munro, & Verschoor, 2011) reinforces these findings that women neither identify more with household interests nor, therefore, do they contribute more to the common pool than men. Jackson (2013) concludes that “the complex interdependencies of husbands and wives in diverse ethnographies suggest a more uncertain balance of power within a marriage than the co-operative conflict model implies”. In research on South Asia, Furuta and Salway (2006) argue that spousal autonomy is further circumscribed by interdependencies across and within families.

The family sociology literature (Rosenbluth, Steil, & Whitcomb, 1998) sees decision making as a measure of relationship equality with a number of studies concluding that equal sharing in decision making is beneficial for relationships

(Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Lange & Worrell, 1990). However, the literature distinguishes between significant and less important decisions. Thus, Safliios-Rothschild (1970) talked of ‘orchestration power’ (making important decisions which do not infringe on a partner's time but affect the household's lifestyle) and ‘implementation power’ (the time consuming but less important decisions). In Western middle class families, for instance, routine housekeeping decisions were made by the wife but career-related decisions were made by the husband (Edgell, 1980; Steil & Weltman, 1991). Similarly, Fox and Murry (2000) conclude that although couples might see their marriages as equal and their family roles as egalitarian, husbands were more likely to retain an upper hand in decision-making processes. Only rarely (Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005) do wives see themselves as exerting more influence than their husbands in dual career households.

In the context of developing countries, Basu (2002) find that child labor in Nepal is least likely to occur in households where there is a balance of power between spouses. They extend a collective bargaining model to include child labor and hypothesize a U-shaped relationship between women's agency and child labor—in other words, as women's agency increases, child labor will fall initially and then rise (see also Basu, 2006). They begin with the assumption that both parents dislike sending their children out to work. Their result hinges on the fact that when both spouses are equally powerful, neither the father nor the mother benefits exclusively from the additional income earned by their children. Rammohan and Robertson (2012) also find that educational outcomes are better in communities where the norms favor equal inheritance.

Using earlier rounds of the IFLS dataset than we use in this paper, Beegle, Frankenberg, and Thomas (2001) analyze the impact of bargaining power on prenatal and delivery care in Indonesia. Their measure of bargaining power is based on relative ownership of assets by the partners, their relative education and family backgrounds (which are seen to determine outside options). They find that while the distribution of economic power within a household significantly influences prenatal and delivery care, the impact of relative education and family background is mixed. They conclude that “power is multifaceted and each indicator captures a different dimension of the complex interactions that take place between husband and wife as they negotiate investments in reproductive health” (p. 143).

More recent studies have used more direct measures of agency (Adato, Brière, Mindek, & Quisumbing, 2003; Fernandez *et al.*, 2015; Mabsout & van Staveren, 2010; Quisumbing, 2003) facilitated by the availability of household decision-making data. Analyzing the use of maternal health services in Bangladesh using this measure, Story and Burgard (2012) find the husband's involvement in decision making is especially important because male decisions on large household purchases and husband only decision making is less beneficial to the use of maternal health services than joint decision making. A number of other studies have suggested that greater equality in decision making (Kabeer, 2001) or joint household decision making (Mullany, Hindin, & Becker, 2005) may yield better outcomes.

For the purposes of this research, we focus on three main ethnic groups, the patriarchal and patrilineal Batak, the bilateral Javanese, and the matrilineal Minangkabau.

(b) *Kinship systems in Indonesia*

Indonesia is culturally diverse and made up of hundreds of ethnic groups (Sakai, 2010; Statistics Indonesia & Macro

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