

Do Economics Trump Culture?

Effects of women's work and relative economic advantages on household decisionmaking among currently married women in the Kingdom of Jordan

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Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA), like much of the developing world, have experienced profound demographic changes since the 1950s. Among the most notable changes in the region that are likely to revolutionize gender dynamics both within the home and workplace are the decline in fertility, improvement in maternal and child health, increase in women's educational attainment, rise in women's age at marriage, and the narrowing of the spousal age gap (Tabutin and Schoumaker 2005). Despite the profound implications of demographic changes on gender dynamics within the household and the market, the relationship between Arab women's status in the market and within the household has not been adequately addressed. Most research has focused on the persistently low rates of women's labor force participation and structural level explanations (Miles 2002; Moghadam 1998; World Bank 2004). Few studies explore the nature of women's productive work beyond labor force participation (such as hours of work, earnings, and occupational status). Studies that have explored women's empowerment within the Arab household tend to focus on its benefits in terms of child and maternal health outcomes (Al Riyami, Afifi, and Mabry 2004; Kishor 1995). Few address Arab women's empowerment as an end in itself. In the region, the issue of women's empowerment within the household can be a thorny one as it is often construed as power over men rather than women's power over their own lives. Finally, research on women's status and gender dynamics in MENA are mostly qualitative owing to the lack of data (Moghadam 2005). While quantitative methods have their shortcomings, they enable an analysis not possible by qualitative studies due to sample size restrictions.

Significance and relevance to current state of knowledge

Using the 2007 Jordan Demographic and Health Survey, a nationally representative survey covering 14,564 households and 10,876 ever-married women aged 15-49 years, I explore the effects of women's work and advantages in relative economic resources on their authority in household decisionmaking. Rarely has research in the MENA region examined the relationship between differences in women and men's economic resources and power relations within the household. This type of analysis is largely absent and has been mostly qualitative (Miles 2002). Jordan offers a unique context to explore the effects of women's relative economic resources on household decisionmaking. The country has undertaken efforts to enhance the labor market characteristics of its population, develop new industries and promote women's work, but it also remains a bastion of traditional gender and family norms.

To my knowledge, the focus on the effects of women's advantages in relative income and occupational status on decisionmaking within the Arab household is new. Research on occupational status and intra-household gender dynamics has been conducted in advanced countries yielding mixed results (Blood and Wolfe 1960; Coverman 1985; Davies and Carrier 1999; McAllister 1990; Opong 1970). Occupational status, operationalized in terms of prestige using Treiman's Standard International Occupational Prestige Scale (SIOPS) taps into non-material resources resulting from work (i.e. social prestige) (Adler and Kraus 1985) which may influence women's authority in household decisionmaking. The use of Treiman's prestige scale is justified in that it is robust across countries of different levels of development and historical periods (Abdollahyan and Nayebi 2009; Carter Jr and Sepulveda 1964; Haller and Bills 1979; Haller and Lewis 1966).

To what extent does work enhance women's decisionmaking authority within the Arab family? Do women's advantages in economic resources such as income and occupational prestige

enhance their authority in household decisionmaking? Do these effects vary by dimension of decisionmaking (i.e. type of decision)? In a society governed by traditional gender and family norms, are cultural resources such as family status within the household (e.g. married to household head, number of sons, and relationship to husband prior to marriage) more important predictors of women's authority within the household?

Theoretical framework

I draw on a number of theoretical perspectives – namely, resource theory in a cultural context, gender display perspectives, feminist theories of power and empowerment theories. My focus on women's authority in household decisionmaking is based on the conceptualization of women's empowerment as access to and control over material and non-material resources that would enable one to decide and act free from the control of others (Dixon-Mueller 1978; Dyson and Moore 1983; Mason 1986). I distinguish between different types of decisions in keeping with the conceptualization of empowerment as multidimensional (Kishor 2000; Malhotra 1997; Malhotra and Mather 1997; Mason 1986). Women's empowerment is context specific in that context gives social meaning to sources of power, what can be bargained over, extent of bargaining possible, and the size of effects on women's empowerment (Agarwal 1997; Dharmalingam and Morgan 1996; Heaton, Huntsman, and Flake 2005; Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001; Malhotra 1997). Effects vary by the dimension of empowerment (or type of decision) and by context. Work, even unpaid, develops women's self-esteem, communication and negotiation skills and sense of responsibility, which can be leveraged for greater authority in household decisionmaking. In more traditional contexts, such as Jordan, relative economic advantages may matter less, or not at all, for women's authority in household decisionmaking compared to more culturally relevant sources of power such as women's status within the household (Mason 1997). Additionally, asymmetries in economic resources between the conjugal pair may invoke gender display issues and influence power dynamics within the household.

I argue that the effects of women's work and relative advantages in economic resources on women's authority in household decisionmaking differ by type of decision. Additionally, in more traditional societies governed by patriarchal gender and family norms, women's family position may be a stronger predictor of domestic power than economic resources. First, I test whether work enhances women's decisionmaking authority within the household. Second, I test whether women's advantages in economic resources, i.e. relative income and relative occupational prestige, enhance their authority in household decisionmaking. Third, I test whether the effects of women's work and relative economic resources vary by dimension of domestic power (i.e. type of household decision).

Data and Methods

The data source for the study is the 2007 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) for Jordan conducted by Macro International. The Jordan DHS is a nationally representative sample of 14,564 households covering all 12 governorates and urban and rural areas. The eligible women response rate was 97.9% (Jordan DHS 2007). Due to my focus on the effects of women's relative resources on authority in household decisions, my sample is restricted to currently married women. This leaves us with a sample size of 10,360 currently married women.

DHS asked women "who usually decides..." or "who usually makes decisions..." on/about the following: (1) how husband's earnings are used; (2) health care for yourself; (3) making major purchases; (4) making purchases for daily household needs; and (5) visits to your family and relatives. Each of these are ordinal variables with the following response categories: respondent; husband; respondent and husband jointly; someone else; and other. In many developing countries, household decisionmaking is not confined to the conjugal pair and may include other co-residing relatives such as parents and in-laws. The majority of households in Jordan are nuclear. Given my conceptual approach to household decisionmaking in terms of women's empowerment, I focus on women's authority in household decisionmaking and my dependent variable is the number of decisions for which women are the sole deciders. Accordingly, the above-described measures are aggregated into a

summary index of authority in household decisionmaking, ranging from 1 to 5 and reflecting the number of decisions for which the respondent has the sole say.

Because this study focuses on whether economic indicators of empowerment adequately explain decisionmaking dynamics within the Arab household, three measures of economic activity are used – current work, relative income and relative occupational prestige. The survey uses an expanded definition of work that captures both paid and unpaid work and home-based work or work in family business. The measure of work I use includes women who reported working in the last 7 days, or had a job but were absent from it in the last 7 days. In addition to current work status, the DHS asked women “would you say that the money you earn is more than what your husband earns, less than what he earns, or about the same.” This variable is ordinal and has the following response categories: more than him; less than him; about the same; husband doesn’t bring in any money; and don’t know. Women who are currently working or worked in the last 12 months were also asked about their current occupation. Wives also reported on their husbands’ occupations. DHS coded occupations according to 1988 International Standard of Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88). I construct a measure of relative occupational prestige by mapping Treiman’s occupational prestige scores to the occupational data of wives and husbands. I calculate relative occupational prestige scores as the difference between wives and husbands’ occupational prestige and classify them into four groups – wife has more prestige, wife has about the same prestige, and wife has less prestige, and both do not work. This operationalization of relative spousal prestige has been used elsewhere (McCloskey 1996).

In more traditional settings, cultural sources of power may be more important than economic ones. In my analysis I include the following measures of women’s status within the household: marital duration, number of living sons, co-wives, relation to the head of household and whether wife is related to the husband prior to marriage. I control for a number of individual and household characteristics including wives’ educational attainment, husbands’ educational attainment, husbands’ economic activity status, whether the husband is living in the same household with respondent, household wealth index and place of residence (urban/rural and region). Descriptive statistics of my sample are presented in Table 1.

Methods

I use principal components factor analysis to examine the underlying structure of household decisionmaking. Factor analysis has been used elsewhere to distinguish between different dimensions of empowerment (Agarwala and Lynch 2006; Kishor 2000). Family decisionmaking authority is first modeled with all five items discussed above. Items that do not load well on a factor are deleted. The extracted components are labeled to best describe the dimensions of decisionmaking within the household that each factor appears to represent based on variables with the highest loadings (0.40 or more) after rotation on that factor, and in keeping with theory and practical utility. Results of the principal component factor analysis indicate that household decisionmaking is underlined by two dimensions – social and organizational decisions (factor 1) and financial and intrapersonal decisions (see Table 2). Predicted scores from the principal component factor analysis are calculated and used in subsequent analysis.

I conduct ordinary least squares stepwise regressions of women’s authority in household decisionmaking on two sets of explanatory factors and control variables. The first set of explanatory factors includes economic sources of women’s empowerment – namely, work, relative income and relative occupational prestige. The second set of factors consists of culturally relevant variables that might be more influential for women’s authority in household decision making in traditional settings – namely, family status indicators described above. I control for a number of background characteristics as described above. I repeat the analysis using the predicted principal component scores of women’s authority in household decisionmaking and compare the results between the two to explore whether the effects of women’s work and advantages in economic resources differ by dimension of household decision making. Because I cannot rule out issues of selectivity in who works, I conduct a propensity score matching procedure to estimate the effect of work on women’s likelihood of being the sole

decision maker. I match women on the following covariates: woman's age, woman's educational level, husband's educational level, household wealth index, whether the woman has at least one child and urban/rural residence.

Cross-tabulations of women's decisionmaking authority by work status, relative income and relative occupational prestige are illustrated in Table 3. These cross tabulations suggest that the extent of women's authority in household decisionmaking vary by women's work status and relative economic advantages. They also suggest that patterns of decisionmaking authority differ by type of decision. These relationships are explored in multivariate analysis that control for a number of background characteristics and sources of domestic power other than economic advantages which may be more relevant in a traditional cultural setting.

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Table 1. Summary statistics of variables

	N	Mean	SD
Dependent variables			
Final say in personal health	10360	0.473	0.499
Final say in large purchases	10360	0.106	0.308
Final say in daily needs	10360	0.262	0.440
Final say in social visits to friends and family	10360	0.102	0.303
Final say on own earnings (asked only to women who work)	1350	0.357	0.479
Final say on husband's' earnings	9939	0.040	0.196
Number of decisions woman has final say (0-5)	10360	0.981	1.071
Independent variables			
A. Economic variables			
Respondents' current working status (include paid and unpaid productive work)	10360	0.133	0.339
Relative income			
Respondent earns more or about the same income as husband	10358	0.052	0.222
Respondent earns less income than husband	10358	0.074	0.262
Husband does not earn income	10358	0.004	0.064
Wife has no earnings (includes women who do not work and women in unpaid work)	10358	0.870	0.336
Relative occupational prestige			
Both spouses do not work	10356	0.142	0.349
Both spouses have same prestige	10356	0.017	0.128

Table 1. Summary statistics of variables

	N	Mean	SD
Wife has more prestige	10356	0.079	0.269
Husband has more prestige (includes wives with less prestigious occupations and wives who do not work)	10356	0.763	0.425
B. Family Status variables (cultural variables)			
Husband lives in same household as respondent	10360	0.984	0.124
Household wealth index			
Poorest	10360	0.278	0.448
Poorer	10360	0.249	0.433
Middle	10360	0.209	0.407
Richer	10360	0.160	0.366
Richest	10360	0.104	0.306
Marital duration (continuous ranging between 0-37)	10360	12.816	8.573
Respondent has at least one son	10360	0.812	0.391
Husband has other wives	10348	0.061	0.239
Related to husband prior to marriage	10359	0.432	0.495
Control variables			
Respondent's age (continuous variable 15-49)	10360	33.752	7.914
Respondents' educational level			
No education	10360	0.064	0.244
Primary	10360	0.090	0.286
Secondary	10360	0.567	0.496
Higher	10360	0.280	0.449
Husbands' educational level			
No education	10360	0.035	0.183
Primary	10360	0.130	0.336
Secondary	10360	0.598	0.490
Higher	10360	0.238	0.426
Don't know	10360	0.000	0.017
Region			
Central	10360	0.369	0.483
North	10360	0.305	0.460
South	10360	0.284	0.451
Not de jure residence	10360	0.042	0.201
Urban	10360	0.690	0.462

Notes: Values are not weighted.

Table 2. Factors for different dimensions of women's authority in household decision making with the variables that are most correlated (factor loadings of 0.40 or more after rotation)

Factor number	Assigned factor label	Variables most correlated	Factor loading after rotation
1	Social and organizational decisions	Large purchases	0.749
		Daily needs	0.676
		Social visits to friends and family	0.663
2	Financial and intrapersonal decisions	Personal health	0.539
		Own earnings	0.673
		Husband's earnings	-0.733

Table 3. Women's authority in household decision making by various economic status measures, Jordan 2007

	Proportion of women reporting final say on...					No. of decisions wife has sole say (Index ranging from 0 to 5)
	Personal health	Large purchases	Daily needs	Social visits to family and friends	Husband's earnings	
Current work status						
Currently working (N=1,373)	0.505	0.149	0.288	0.115	0.045	1.101
Currently not working (N=8,987)	0.468	0.099	0.258	0.100	0.039	0.963
Relative income						
Wife earns more or same as husband (N=540)	0.509	0.183	0.269	0.111	0.050	1.122
Wife earns less income than husband (N=766)	0.492	0.116	0.292	0.110	0.043	1.054
Husband doesn't earn any income (N=42)	0.667	0.262	0.405	0.214	n/a	1.548
Wife has no earnings (N=9,010)	0.469	0.099	0.258	0.100	0.039	0.963
Relative occupational prestige						
Both don't work (N=1,466)	0.518	0.128	0.222	0.122	0.046	1.025
Both same prestige (N=173)	0.451	0.104	0.312	0.098	0.040	1.006
Wife more prestige (N=816)	0.520	0.161	0.284	0.121	0.051	1.134
Husband more prestige (N=7901)	0.461	0.096	0.265	0.096	0.038	0.956

Notes: Values are unweighted.