



The Need to Relook at the Measure of Women's Agency

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Abstract

The ability of women to exercise their agency is a crucial determinant of several socio-economic processes and outcomes. It shapes intrahousehold decision-making behaviour, bargaining power, and resource allocation. We raise the concern of reexamining the measure of agency, especially relational agency, in the context of a dynamic and rapidly changing socio-economic structure. We argue that the traditional survey measures need an overall restructuring.

Keywords: Women's Agency, Intrahousehold Dynamics, National Family Health Surveys.

Introduction

The vast literature on household economics suggests that intrahousehold dynamics exercise their influence over all consumption and production decisions made by the household. Over decades of research, development practitioners and gender activists have argued the increasing importance of gender as a factor for effective development. Many macro-level developmental outcomes rest on women's ability to negotiate favourable intrahousehold allocation of resources at the micro level (Doss, 2013). This allocation of resources in turn is contingent on the bargaining power that women exercise within households and in turn determines their human capital outcomes. Therefore, a focus on intrahousehold outcomes and bargaining power is crucial. The collective models of household behaviour incorporate the gender dimension, with bargaining models being among the first developed within this framework. Unlike unitary models, which assume unanimous decision-making, bargaining models recognise the presence of at least two actors with differing interests, leading to negotiation and

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bargaining (Mattila-Wiro, 1999). Gender affects the allocation of household resources, with women typically allocating more resources toward the well-being of all household members, including children's education, food, and health (Onah & Horton, 2018; Lebni et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024).

Conversations on gender (in)equality, for decades, have rested on a familiar set of ideas such as women's agency, autonomy, and empowerment. Kabeer's (1999) seminal work stresses access to material, human, and social resources. If the measures of agency are disjointed from their contextual setting, they lose meaning and become susceptible to contradictory interpretations. Evidence from the literature suggests that the exercise of agency by women is facilitated by education, earnings, asset holdings, spousal age gap, caste and religion, among other factors and is in turn a catalyst in driving improved healthcare utilisation, nutritional outcomes, and careful decisions around sexual and reproductive health (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Anderson & Eswaran, 2009; Arokiasamy & Goli, 2012).

Although not very resilient in their measurement, these ideas have shaped academic discourse, survey design, and even government policy. However, the way we measure women's agency within households has always remained far from settled and has rather created spaces for further debates and discourse. For most women, the boundaries between the 'home' and the 'world' are porous. What happens within a household is not distinct from what happens outside it. In fact, micro decisions are foundational for macro policies. Decisions on everyday matters of money, working status, childcare, and even the purchase of groceries reflect who wields power within the household and who does not. Researchers have long argued that when women have a stronger voice at home, manifested through greater decision-making, countries see better outcomes such as higher rates of female labour force participation, healthier children, higher levels of education and more stable households.

How is Women's Agency Captured?

Most national surveys, including India's National Family Health Survey (NFHS) (IIPS, 2021), make use of the typical checklist every time it sets out to capture women's agency. Does the woman decide what to cook? Can she go to the market alone? Can she go to the nearest health facility by herself? Who gets to decide on her healthcare needs? Does she have her own bank account? Can she spend money independently on small and big purchases? These questions undoubtedly hold some importance when we are trying to measure woman's 'voice' within her household. These measures made a lot of sense when they were first introduced and offered a crucial window into women's lives, capturing their voice in contexts where even basic decision-making was not guaranteed and was merely an aspirational luxury for

many. Over time, this list has expanded to include land ownership, views on the perpetration of domestic violence, decisions over contraception use, and more. All of these indicators do tell us something important: when women have more education, income, or assets, they usually gain more bargaining power within the household, and this stands to benefit both themselves and their children.

Where is the Problem?

These measures come with their own set of limitations. First and foremost, the fact that women's agency is measured using these large cross-sectional datasets paints a static picture of agency, which was perhaps exercised at a particular point in time. But agency is a dynamic and relational measure, especially within a household. The capability to exercise their agency in the daily and often mundane decisions about the regular running of the household is also liable to change with time. A younger daughter-in-law exercises very little decision-making power, but an older mother-in-law wields a lot more power. The ability to exercise agency is then not only an inter-gender issue but also involves intergenerational intra-gender power dynamics. The household, which is almost always considered a homogeneous unit, is in fact a site of ever-evolving relational dynamics and is by no means static.

There is a need to go a step further and ask under what conditions in the household does the woman make her decision? What are the factors that mediate her decision? It could likely be her mother-in-law's or husband's stated preferences which take a weight over and above her own preferences. Is it her deprivation from decision-making processes that shapes her choices? Has she taken her call in alignment with what the household values are? If the woman has made a decision, the traditional surveys consider it as a box ticked, but what lies behind the decision-making process remains unknown. In fact, in situations where there are contending approaches, whose decision is given precedence? Questions around mobility asked with an 'are you allowed' framing miss out on the nuances of when and under what circumstances she is being granted permission. Does a yes change to a no, depending on the time of the day? Is she allowed to go out of the household premises in the afternoon but not in the evening? Just capturing the number of women who own a mobile phone is insufficient. Is the usage of that phone dictated by the husband or the father or the father-in-law? Is the usage of a personal phone and access to a bank account under marital or parental supervision? Whether the woman gets to build and nurture strong social relations outside the house and marital relationship is also of extreme significance in discussing women's agency.

Evidence suggests that asset ownership significantly improves the bargaining power of women (Lundberg & Pollak, 1993; Panda & Agarwal, 2005). The NFHS asks if there is any ownership (both solely or jointly) of physical assets such as land or a house. However, we are unable to judge how much of that asset ownership can create safe fallback options if the marital unit dissolves. Is the money she earns and uses at her will and her ownership of property sufficient markers of her bargaining power to dissociate from the marriage? Moreover, the ownership of assets can sometimes be just titular without translating into substantive economic agency at all (Agarwal, 1997; Anderson & Eswaran, 2009). In India's context, women may own land on account of inheritance or joint-property rights but have no effective decision-making capacity when it comes to utilising the property. In addition, does the woman owning physical assets also have access to credit and legal protections and institutional and structural frameworks for help are understudied and unanswered.

The NFHS also asks questions on the prevalence of marital controlling behaviour imposed by the husband on the wife. Does the husband limit the wife's interaction with other male members, curtail her interaction with her female friends and natal family, or accuse her of unfaithfulness? These questions if answered in affirmation by the woman, indicate authority imposition by the husband. Simply asking women to either affirm or negate these questions without setting the context inhibits us from understanding the implications of marital controlling behaviour. In a similar line are the questions asked on intimate partner violence and women's perception of domestic violence. The woman is asked whether she justifies instances such as burning the food, involving in sexual relations outside the marriage, not taking care of the children and refusing sex to her spouse as rightful reasons for the perpetration of violence on her. Most women answer in affirmation, but we do not know if these answers are what they themselves believe in or are made to internally endorse in alignment with societal values. At this juncture, we also have to acknowledge the difficulty and sensitivity in administering these questions in a domestic violence module.

A measure of women's agency also needs to look into the exercise of choices that women may or may not have around their nutritional outcomes. How much of the food she consumes is decided by her and not what remains after everybody is fed. This warrants attention on several grounds. Women's weak nutritional outcomes make them susceptible to morbidities and have intergenerational consequences as well. Is the household allocation of food resources biased against her? Another factor of utmost importance is the time poverty that women face. With the disproportionate burden of childcare and unpaid domestic work responsibilities, is she able to negotiate spousal time-sharing patterns and participate in the labour market? Is she able to exercise her agency when there are simultaneous demands on her time?

Relational Agency at the Margin?

There is something more than just measuring agency. At what point agency is exercised is also crucial. The existing measures are no doubt fraught with challenges, but let us assume that they work well in households where there are conflicts or provision for negotiation over choices, money, nutrition, or healthcare. In such situations, women who exercise agency voice their opinion and tend to shape decisions. But what about households where disagreement never arises in the first place? Where there are no obvious differences between the spouses regarding choice of schooling for their children, nutritious food, or timely healthcare? Disagreements are less likely to occur in households where the couple is similarly educated, earns similar incomes and shares similar values. This scenario is increasingly common in urban India, especially among assortatively matched couples. For example, according to NFHS-5, in the urban subsample, 59 per cent of both spouses have equal educational attainments and 28 per cent of both spouses are working (the proportions are 53 per cent and 34 per cent, respectively, for rural areas). When preferences naturally align, traditional indicators such as mobility, control over money, and decision-making fail to reveal anything meaningful about the exercise of agency and where it is exercised. Boxes get ticked not because women have gained influence but because conflict never emerges. Ironically, the very absence of disagreement can indicate that women are exercising agency even when the deeper structure of power may remain unchanged. The checklist is ticked not because power dynamics have seen a shift, but because conflict never arises in the first place. As a result, our usual measures fail to capture the real texture of women's agency in modern urban marriages.

This brings us to a central question for modern India: what does agency look like when the usual markers no longer distinguish anything? If women and men enter the institution of marriage on a more equal footing, even if only modestly, how should we rethink bargaining power? Does one instance of a break in agency, such as an act of violence, weaken the existing dynamic and alter the relationship? Does sole decision-making on contraception reflect genuine autonomy over their own reproductive and sexual healthcare needs or simply the burden of responsibility? This leads us to wonder if our current tools are blind to the subtler negotiations that shape women's lives today. As India urbanises and marriage markets evolve, at least in urban areas, our definitions of agency must also change. Continuing to rely on outdated markers risks blinding us to the subtle shifts unfolding inside households, shifts that matter for gender equality but remain invisible in national data. If we want to understand how women exercise agency in the contemporary urban Indian household, we must rethink not just what we measure, but how we measure it. The politics of everyday life, small choices, unspoken compromises, and shared aspirations may hold more clues to

gender dynamics today than the checklists that once defined debates on agency.

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