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## HOW FAMILY POSITION INFLUENCES MARRIED WOMEN'S AUTONOMY AND POWER IN FIVE ASIAN COUNTRIES

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This paper presents a preliminary analysis of how aspects of married women's family position influence their domestic power and autonomy in the developing countries of South and Southeast Asia. The analysis is part of a larger study that is investigating the determinants of women's autonomy and power and their relationship to women's reproductive intentions and behavior (Mason *et al.*, 1989). A basic premise of the larger study is that the nature of women's power and autonomy reflects the social context in which they live, as well as their personal characteristics (Smith, 1989). National, regional, and local cultures and even individual households have distinct traditions about the rights and duties of women and men, rights and duties that are enforced through formal and informal social sanctions. Thus, whether individual wives are able to make important economic decisions, can move about freely, or live relatively free from coercion usually reflects the country, region, community and household in which they live.

The current paper focuses on how certain family characteristics and women's position within the household contribute to their power and autonomy. Three aspects of women's autonomy and power are considered: their economic decision-making power, their freedom of movement (or lack thereof), and the extent to which they are subjected to coercive interpersonal controls by their husband. Although we initially focus on the relationship of national context to these aspects of autonomy and power, most of the analysis concentrates on the impact of household variables: both the socioeconomic position of the household in the broader stratification system, and the position of the married woman within the household as indicated by such variables as the length of time she has been married, the number of

children she has borne, whether she is married to the household head, whether she was related to her husband before marrying him, and the frequency with which she and her husband communicate about reproductive and other matters, such as community events and financial issues. The next section of the paper describes the countries in which the study was conducted. A subsequent section describes the data, measures, and methods used in the analysis. After presenting the analysis, the paper closes with a summary and discussion of results.

## COUNTRIES

Because of the assumption that women's autonomy and power are largely determined by social context, this study was conducted in five countries chosen because they have different gender traditions as well as different levels of socioeconomic development. The countries are Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. In the South Asian countries (Pakistan and India), family patterns and gender traditions tend to deny women autonomy, decision-making power, and freedom of movement in most spheres. Especially in Pakistan and North India, women are expected to observe some form of *purdah* ("seclusion" or norms of modesty *vis-à-vis* members of the opposite sex). Family structure in this part of the world also is built around the ideal of a multi-generational patrilineal household in which sons remain throughout their lives while daughters marry out and wives marry in, often from a considerable distance away (Dyson and Moore, 1983; Srinivas, 1976). This puts in-marrying brides at a disadvantage because they enter the household as strangers, without legitimacy or social supports. Thus, in addition to social norms that dictate that men are the head of the family, the inheritors of the land, and the leaders of the community, and that women are to be modest and obedient, first to parents, then to husbands and parents-in-law, family traditions put women at a considerable disadvantage when it comes to household decision-making power and autonomy.

In South India, gender norms are somewhat more egalitarian than in North India and family structure less disadvantageous to new brides (Dyson and Moore, 1983). South India does not practice *purdah* to the same extent as it is practiced in North India, and the custom of preferential cross-cousin marriage means that women often marry within their natal villages into a household known to them since childhood. Thus, women in South India, although expected to maintain modesty and obedience to their husbands, are more able to attend school and to work outside the home, and are less powerless domestically when they marry than are their counterparts in the North of the country.

Southeast Asia stands in even greater contrast to Pakistan and North India than do the southern states of India (Dyson and Moore, 1983).

Compared to most of South Asia, norms of female modesty and obedience are less stringent in Southeast Asia, tolerance for women's public-sphere activities is greater, and family patterns less disadvantageous for women's power and autonomy (Mason *et al.*, 1995). For example, Southeast Asian family patterns place less emphasis on the male line than do South and East Asian patterns. Indeed, if there is a bias in these family systems, it is toward the female line.<sup>1</sup> An emphasis on the conjugal household, rather than on the joint or stem family household idealized in South and East Asia, also is relatively strong in most Southeast Asian countries. Thus, while women in Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines can hardly be characterized as being equal to the men of their class and ethnicity, they tend to enjoy greater autonomy and power than do their counterparts in South Asia. We thus expect to see higher levels of female autonomy in our samples from Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines than in the samples from India or Pakistan.<sup>2</sup>

## DATA, MEASURES AND METHODS

The data for this study were collected collaboratively by teams of researchers located in the five countries involved in the study<sup>3</sup>. In each country, from seven to 21 communities were purposively selected to represent a range of gender and development conditions within that country. In all countries except Pakistan, both Muslim and non-Muslim villages were sampled so as to permit a test of the idea that Islam restricts women's freedom. In Pakistan, villages were selected from three agro-economic zones of Punjab state thought to differ in terms of feudal organization and hence the latitude given to females in their day-to-day lives. In India, the state of Uttar Pradesh was selected from the northern part of the country and the state of Tamil Nadu from the southern part. Within each state, Muslim and non-Muslim villages at different levels of economic development were then selected. In Malaysia, samples of the three major ethnic groups comprising the population of that country (Malays, Chinese, and Indians) were drawn in both urban and rural areas. In Thailand, a series of villages representing the four major regions of the country were selected through

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<sup>1</sup>For example, in Thailand, the youngest daughter is expected to remain with or near her parents to care for them in old age, meaning that it is her husband who must move at marriage and live with another family, rather than the young woman.

<sup>2</sup> The case of Malaysia is complicated by the presence in that country of three major ethnic groups, Malays, Chinese, and South Indians. These groups have different family and gender traditions, some of them quite conservative. For this reason, we expect Malaysia to hold a position intermediate between the South Asian and the other Southeast Asian countries in our study.

<sup>3</sup>Teams leaders were, in Pakistan: Dr. Zeba A. Sathar; in India: Dr. Shireen J. Jejeebhoy; in Malaysia: Dr. Shyamala Nagaraj; in Thailand: Dr. Napaporn Chayovan; and in the Philippines: Dr. Corazon M. Raymundo.

probability methods, as were neighborhoods within a city in each region plus the capital city of Bangkok. In the southern region of Thailand, two of the four selected villages were Muslim while two were Thai Buddhist<sup>4</sup>. Finally, in the Philippines, purposively selected were two Muslim villages from Zamboanga Province (the province where the majority of rural Filipino Muslims reside), two areas within metro-Manila, the capital city, and six additional villages from three central provinces of the country with different agricultural and economic conditions. In each of the 59 villages selected for the study, a sample of currently married women ages 15–39 was interviewed, along with approximately half of their husbands. Thus, instead of consisting of probability samples of national populations, the data used in this study consist of samples of women from mostly rural communities purposively chosen to represent distinct gender and development conditions.

The interviews with married women aged 15–39 asked about a number of aspects of their decision-making power and autonomy. Six items concerning their economic power and autonomy are combined into a single scale in this analysis<sup>5</sup>. In all countries except Thailand, women were also asked a series of questions about whether they needed to get permission from a family member in order to travel to seven types of locations, including a local market, a local health center, the fields outside the village, the village community center, the home of a relative or friend, a nearby fair, shrine or temple, or to the next village. Responses to each item were coded 1 for yes and 0 for no, and were summed to form a scale representing the number of places the woman is required to get permission before traveling to. The scale thus represents her relative *lack* of freedom of movement.

In addition, in all countries except Malaysia, women were asked two questions concerning coercive interpersonal controls applied to them by their husbands, first, whether the husband beats them, and second, whether they are afraid to disagree with the husband for fear he will become angry with them. Responses to these yes-no questions were summed to form a three-point scale that roughly taps the extent to which the woman is subjected to coercive interpersonal controls by her husband.

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<sup>4</sup> In Thailand, communities were chosen using probabilistic methods from the sampling frame used in the first Thai Demographic and Health Survey. In all other countries, selection was purposive, as noted in the text.

<sup>5</sup> The six items are: (1) Please tell me who in your family decides about the following: whether to purchase major goods for the household such as a TV/refrigerator? (Wife=1, others=0); (2) Please tell me who in your family decides the following: whether you should work outside the home? (Wife=1, others=0); (3) & (4) Who of these people usually has the greatest say in this decision? (Wife=1, others=0); (5) If you wanted to buy yourself a dress/sari, would you feel free to do it without consulting your husband [or a senior member of your family]? (Yes=1, no or undecided=0); (6) If you wanted to buy yourself a small item of jewelry, such as a bangle/beads/etc., would you feel free to do it without consulting your husband [or a senior member of your family]? (Yes=1, no or undecided=0). Responses to the six items were summed to create a scale ranging in value from 0 through 6 (highest level of economic decision-making power/autonomy).

The properties of the three scales vary. An earlier analysis of the economic decision-making power scale suggests it is reasonably coherent as judged by loadings on a principal components factor analysis (Mason, 1996). The seven freedom of movement items also are strongly interrelated as judged by principal components analysis, although an as yet incomplete analysis suggests that not all seven items scale equally well in all countries under the Rasch model (results not shown). The coercive interpersonal controls scale, however, is relatively weak and is used here primarily for convenience<sup>6</sup>. In future analysis, we will examine responses to individual items. In the present paper, however, the aim is to provide an overview of how family conditions are related to three distinct aspects of women's autonomy and power, namely, their economic decision power, their freedom of movement, and the extent to which they are subjected to coercive interpersonal controls by the husband.

The plan of the analysis is as follows. We first examine means on the three measures of women's autonomy and power in order to assess the extent to which there are country differences. We then turn to ordinary least squares regression results predicting each of the three scales of women's autonomy and power from a series of family and background variables<sup>7</sup>. The wife's position in her family is measured by the length of time she has been married, whether she is the wife of the household head or instead is married to some other family member, whether she was related to her husband before marriage, the number of children she has borne, and how often she and her husband discuss two types of issues: those related to fertility, and those related to household finances or the community. The last two variables each are scales formed from two underlying items asking women how frequently they and their husbands discuss four issues: how many children to have, whether to use birth control, what to spend money on, and what is happening in the community<sup>8</sup>. We expect all of these measures to be related to women's autonomy and power positively. Being married for a long time should give women more experience and a more secure position in the family and hence should increase their autonomy. Being married to the household head should also enhance their autonomy because this means either that the woman lives in a conjugal family household or, in an extended or stem family household, is the senior wife who, by virtue of being married to the head, should have decision-making authority in traditional "female"

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<sup>6</sup>Although the two coercive control items do not correlate strongly with the items included in the other two scales, their correlations with each other are modest, although positive. These intercorrelations vary from .3 in India to .01 in the Philippines, with the other values falling in the .1-.2 range.

<sup>7</sup>Because the coercive control scale has a very limited range (from zero to two), we also replicated the analysis for this scale using ordered logits estimated with maximum likelihood. With only one exception (discussed in the text), the results from the ordered logit analysis were very close to those from the ordinary least squares analysis in terms of the sign of relationships and their statistical significance.

<sup>8</sup> Each item is scored 1 for "never", 2 for "sometimes", and 3 for "frequently", and values for the two items in each scale are summed to form the scale.

spheres. Having children is frequently speculated to enhance women's authority because it fulfills her basic obligation to continue the family line. Finally, discussing issues with her husband is an indicator that the wife is privy to information about a subject and is regarded by her husband as worthy of entering into a discussion. Discussing an issue more frequently should therefore be associated with having greater autonomy or decision-making power in that sphere.

The regression analysis also controls for two personal characteristics thought to be important for women's autonomy and power in most settings: their age and level of education. Both represent exposure to experiences likely to build self-confidence and knowledge of the world. Older women and those with a higher level of schooling should therefore enjoy greater autonomy and power. The analysis also controls for the family's socioeconomic position as measured by three indicators: 1) the husband's level of education, 2) the household's total income relative to the average in the total sample for that country (trichotomized into high, medium, and low categories), and 3) an index of ownership of six non-electric household possessions<sup>9</sup>. Whether a high socioeconomic status should enhance or detract from women's autonomy and power is unclear. Although well-educated husbands may be more liberal about granting their wives autonomy and a say in important household decisions, well-off families are also able to engage in culturally-prescribed practices such as *purdah* that poorer families cannot afford and that are also likely to reduce women's autonomy and power (Balk, 1996).

Finally, all regressions also control for community, as represented by a dummy variable classification. Thus, in the regressions estimated for the total sample, 58 dummy variables for community (and country) are included, while in the within-country regressions, between six and 20 dummies are included.

## RESULTS

Figure 19.1 graphs the means for the three autonomy scales by country. On all three scales, women's power or autonomy tends to be higher in the Southeast Asian countries -- especially in Thailand and the Philippines -- than in Pakistan or India. For example, women's economic power is lowest in Pakistan and highest in Thailand. Their freedom of movement is greater in Malaysia and the Philippines than in Pakistan or India. And their exposure to coercive interpersonal controls is highest in Pakistan and lowest in the Philippines, with the level in India and Thailand intermediate. Because the

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<sup>9</sup> We restricted this index to non-electric goods in order to avoid confounding the availability of electricity in the community with the socioeconomic position of the household.

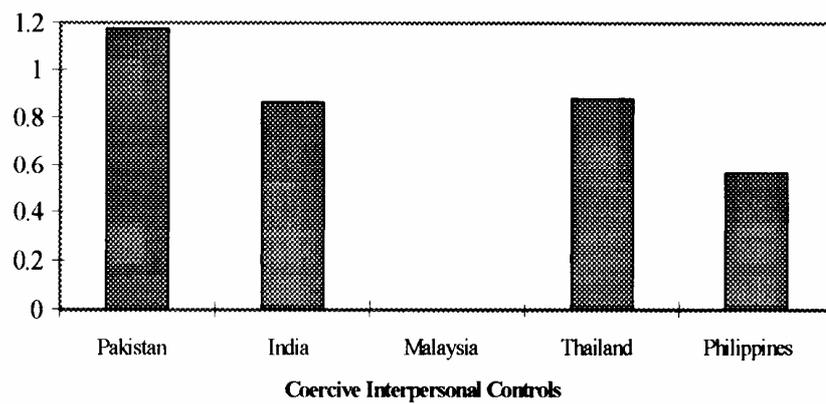
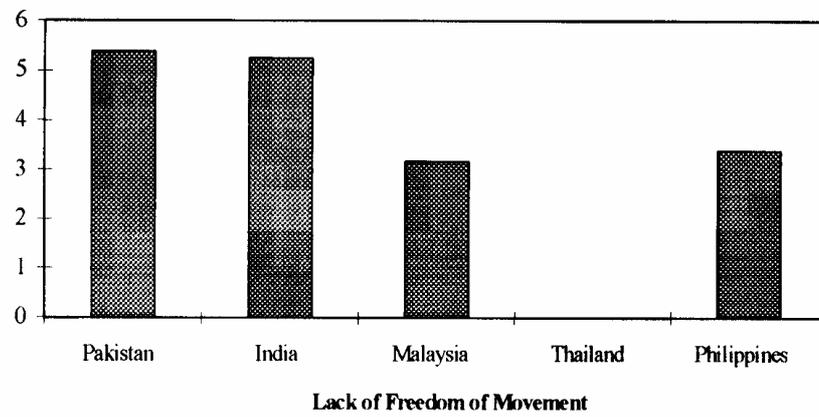
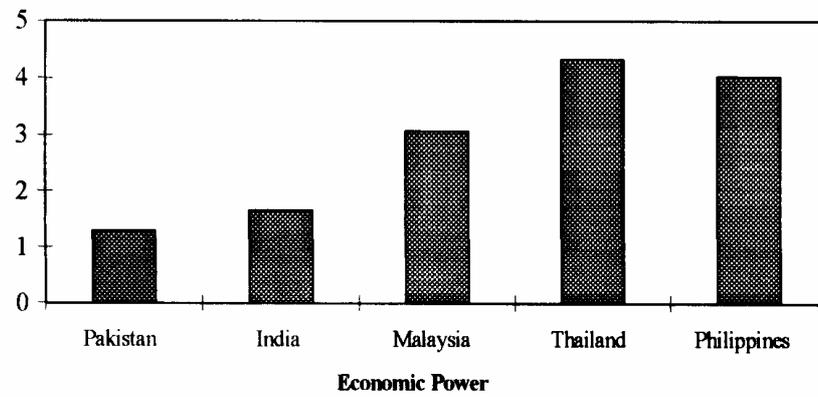
sample for each country is (with the exception of Thailand) a non-probability sample, there is no necessary reason for country means to line up as expected.

That they do suggests that there are indeed major differences across the five countries in gender conditions. We return to this point after examining family correlates of women's autonomy and power.

Let us first examine the correlates of women's economic decision-making power. The metric regression coefficients relating family and individual variables to the decision-making scale are shown in Table 19.1, both for all countries combined and for each country separately. Although we do not show the coefficients for community in Table 19.1, it is important to keep in mind that the underlying regression equations contain dummy variables representing the relevant communities. Thus, the regression coefficients shown in Table 19.1 are estimated net of the effects of community and, by implication, of country. Note also that although owning land and engaging in paid work are strong predictors of women's economic decision-making power (Mason, 1996), controlling for these variables does not appreciably change the results shown in Table 19.1 (results not shown).

Generally, the longer that a woman has been married, the more likely she is to enjoy economic decision-making power. This effect can be seen in most of the countries, but is pronounced enough to achieve statistical significance only in the South Asia ones. Being the wife of the household head -- that is, either residing in a conjugal household or as the wife of the head of a joint household -- also is associated with having economic decision-making power. This effect is consistent with the observation that women in conjugal family households have more power and autonomy than those in joint or stem families, unless they are married to the senior male in the family. Again, the effect of residing as the wife of the household head, although evident in all five countries, is strong only in Pakistan and India.

The literature on family patterns in South Asia frequently mentions the idea that marrying a relative -- especially a cross-cousin -- enhances women's autonomy and power after marriage because it normally involves marrying into a family that already knows and has some affection for and commitment to the bride. Marriage between related individuals is quite common in South Asia. For example, 80% of the Pakistani women in our sample and 60% of the Tamil Nadu women are related to their husbands, as are also 51% of the ethnic Indians in the Malaysian sample. As can be seen in Table 19.1, however, being related to the husband does not appear to enhance women's economic power and autonomy. To the contrary, if anything, it detracts from it, especially in South Asia. Thus, despite claims that marrying a related man helps to allay the powerlessness of young brides, our data suggest the opposite.



**Figure 19.1: Autonomy Measures by Country.**

Table 19.1. – Metric regression coefficients for the economic power scale regressed onto family and background variables: Five countries.<sup>a</sup>

Predictor variable	All countries	Pakistan	India	Malaysia	Thailand	Philippines
<i>Family measures:</i>						
Marriage duration	.01*	.05**	.04*	.02	.00	.01
Is wife of head	.34**	.49**	.42**	.14	.32**	.10
Related to husband	-.10*	-.20	-.17*	-.14	-.01	.24
Number of children	-.05**	-.05*	-.03	-.10**	-.07*	-.03
<i>Couple discusses:</i>						
Fertility matters	-.02	.02	.04	-.02	-.04	-.04
Other matters	.09**	.16**	.21**	.03	.00	.06
<i>Background:</i>						
Woman's age	.04**	.00	.01	.06**	.07**	.04**
Years of education	.04**	.05*	.00	.06**	.05**	.03*
Husband's education	.01*	-.00	.02	-.01	.02	-.01
<i>Household income:</i>						
High (omitted)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Medium	-.10*	-.20	-.07	-.20	.11	-.43**
Low	-.11*	-.29**	-.16	-.26*	.06	-.25
Possessions index	-.03	-.02	.01	-.10*	-.05*	-.04
Constant	-.12	.25	-.06	1.38**	1.12**	3.74**
R-squared	.49**	.16**	.15**	.20**	.15**	.13**
No. of observations	7261	978	1839	1273	2184	987
*Significant, .05 level. **Significant, .01 level.						
a- All regressions in this and in subsequent tables also control for community (represented as a series of dummy variables).						

Why is this the case? Especially in Pakistan, where uncle-niece marriages are fairly common, the results for relationship to husband might be supposed to reflect an unusually large age gap between the husband and his wife when the two are related rather than anything about their being related *per se*. Adding an explicit measure of the difference between the husband's and wife's age to the regressions, however, in no way alters the results for being related to the husband. Indeed, the age difference between husband and wife is unrelated to wives' economic decision-making power in all five samples (results not shown).

An alternative explanation may be that marrying a cross-cousin or uncle in Pakistan and India has become a sign of traditionalism, and that wives who are married to related men enjoy less economic power than average not because they married a relative, but rather because they come from traditional families. Again, however, adding measures of the wife's attitudes about the roles of women and men to the regression equations in no way alters the results for being related to the husband before marriage.

Thus, if these attitudes accurately reflect how traditional in outlook the wife's household is, then traditionality does not appear to explain the unexpected result for being related to the husband, either. Although the reason for the result thus remains unclear, it would appear that marrying a related man does not enhance women's economic power in South Asia.

We expected that having borne a fairly large number of children would enhance a woman's power and autonomy because she would have fulfilled one of her most important traditional duties and would thereby have proven her worth to her husband and his family. In fact, however, our regression results show a negative net relationship between the number of children a woman has borne and her level of economic autonomy and power rather than a positive relationship. It is important to note that this relationship is positive before controlling for marriage duration or age (results not shown). It is only when the length of the current union is taken into account that a high level of childbearing becomes associated with a lower level of economic power and autonomy (although the relationship does not achieve statistical significance in India or the Philippines). Perhaps this means that it is women who have failed to bear sons and who consequently feel pressures to bear an inordinately large number of children who tend to lose economic power. Controlling for the number of living sons in the regressions, however, does not alter the results.

Another possible explanation for the inverse relationship between number of children and economic decision-making power may be that it is the most traditional families that both encourage high fertility and deprive married women of such power. As was the case with being related to the husband prior to marriage, however, controlling for the wife's gender-role attitudes in no way alters the results for number of children. Thus, family traditionality does not appear to explain the inverse relationship between fertility and women's economic decision-making power. This leaves as the most likely explanation the opposite causal path from the one implicit in the regressions shown in Table 19.1. In other words, it is probably wives' economic decision-making power that helps to determine their fertility rather than their fertility that determines their power, a common hypothesis in the literature (Mason, 1993). Regardless of whether this explanation is correct, it is evident that having additional children does not, in general, secure a greater say in the household's economic decisions for the wife. Rather, age and a longer duration of marriage help to accomplish these, as does residing in a conjugal household or as the wife of the head of a joint household.

The final variables concerned with women's familial position are the two measures of husband-wife communication. As is the case with many of the other variables considered in this analysis, the endogeneity of these variables with respect to women's economic decision-making power is unclear. Women who have a lot of say in the household's economic decisions may as a consequence tend to engage their husbands in discussions of family finances or community events more frequently than do

wives who have little say. Or it may be that by discussing family finances or community events, a husband empowers his wife economically and socially. In any case, the regression results suggest that discussing non-fertility issues, such as family finances and community events, is related to a greater say in family economic decisions in the two South Asian countries although not in the other three countries. Perhaps in contexts where husbands and wives often lead separate lives and are not expected to discuss much of anything, having such discussions fairly frequently is a marker of a less traditional, more conjugally-oriented relationship, and hence of conditions that tend to enhance the wife's economic decision-making power and autonomy.

In addition to family position, a woman's age and education both are important for her say in family economic decisions. Older and better educated women usually have more say than do their younger, less schooled counterparts. This is especially the case in the three Southeast Asian countries where norms about women's participation in economic activities and decisions are relatively supportive. In South Asia, a woman's age and education are not very important for her say in family economic decisions, but her position *vis-à-vis* her husband and the other members of her household are. The opposite is true in Southeast Asia. It would thus appear that kinship variables are especially important for women's domestic economic power in settings that generally grant women few freedoms and have family patterns that constrain women's autonomy. In settings whose family systems constrain women less, personal characteristics that influence their experience and independence are, not surprisingly, much more important for the extent of their economic decision-making power.

Because we are dealing with multiple indicators of the family's socioeconomic status (SES), reaching a clear generalization about the impact of this status on women's economic autonomy is not always easy. The results in Table 19.1 suggest, however, that the higher the socioeconomic status of the family, the greater is the wife's economic decision-making power. This may in part reflect the greater level of disposable income likely to be available to women from higher SES families than to those from poor families<sup>10</sup>. In any case, it does not suggest any tendency for high SES household to deny women economic power.

Let us now turn to the results for women's freedom of movement (or lack thereof), which are shown in Table 19.2. Generally, position within the family makes little difference for women's freedom of movement, except that women married to the household head enjoy greater freedom of movement than those residing as daughters-in-law or sisters-in-law, especially in Pakistan and India. Age is also related to freedom of movement in most

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<sup>10</sup> An earlier analysis (Mason, 1996), however, showed that the economic decision-making scale does not simply reflect variations in household income; it also reflects variation in the latitude given to wives to enter into economic decisions in different households.

settings, although not in the Philippines. Especially in the more conservative settings, older women are more trusted to move about on their own than are young brides. Interestingly, however, a woman's education is not very strongly related to her freedom of movement, except in Malaysia where this result is probably an artifact of sampling procedures<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, being wife of the household head and being older are the only family and personal characteristics that appear to enhance women's freedom of movement, especially in the more conservative South Asian settings.

Although it is frequently speculated that wealth enables South Asian families to enforce *purdah*, the results in Table 19.2 suggest little relationship between family SES and wives' freedom of movement, either in general or in South Asia in particular (see Balk, 1996 for rather different results obtained in Bangladesh). The only SES indicator with a significant relationship to the movement scale is the index of household possessions. Although the results for this scale are in the expected direction -- they are positive, meaning that women from wealthier families lack freedom of movement more than do those from poorer families -- the relationship is weak and fails to achieve significance except in Pakistan. Thus, while there is a hint that in India, women in poor families may enjoy greater freedom of movement than women from wealthy families, there is little to suggest this relationship holds in Pakistan or in the Southeast Asian countries.

Finally, let us turn to women's exposure to coercive interpersonal controls, i.e., beatings and intimidation. The regression results predicting these controls are shown in Table 19.3. The results here for the family variables are rather surprising. They suggest that longer-married women with large numbers of children who discuss reproductive issues with the husband frequently are *more* likely to be subjected to coercive interpersonal controls than are other wives. These results are difficult to interpret. Were it not for the significant coefficient for discussing fertility issues, one might interpret them in terms of the family's traditionality. That it is couples who engage in a rather *untraditional* behavior, namely, discussing birth control and fertility, who are most likely to live by the fist and the frown rather than the couples who do not engage in this untraditional behavior suggests otherwise, however. And in fact, when a woman's gender-role attitudes are controlled, none of the results shown in Table 19.3 is significantly altered<sup>12</sup>. Thus, although the explanation is elusive, it would appear that longer-

<sup>11</sup> In Malaysia, the initial sample of rural Malay women was drawn by interviewing rural-based market sellers in the city of Kota Bharu; most of these women were unusually well educated and obviously were self-selected for their ability to leave their home villages and travel to the city to engage in market selling. The market seller sample was later supplemented with additional women from the surrounding rural towns in which the market sellers resided. Despite this supplement, however, a sample selection bias for women who are both well educated and able to go to town to sell their produce undoubtedly remains.

<sup>12</sup> The only result that differs in the ordered logit analysis from what is shown in Table 19.3 is for being related to the husband. In the Philippines, the ordered logit coefficient for this variable fails to achieve statistical significance.

married women with larger numbers of children suffer more coercion from their husbands than do their younger counterparts.

Table 19.2. – Metric regression coefficients for the lack of freedom of movement scale regressed onto family and background variables

Predictor variable	All countries	Pakistan	India	Malaysia	Thailand	Philippines
<i>Family measures:</i>						
Marriage duration	-.02*	-.01	.02	-.02	—	-.03
Is wife of head	-.20*	-3.5*	-.20	.03	—	.14
Related to husband	.11	.17	.08	.08	—	.14
Number of children	.02	-.06	.05	.05	—	.01
<i>Couple discusses:</i>						
Fertility matters	.02	.04	-.08	.03	—	.09
Other matters	-.01	-.11	-.10*	.13	—	.13
<i>Background:</i>						
Woman's age	-.04***	-.03	-.08**	-.05*	—	.01
Years of education	-.02*	.01	.01	-.06*	—	-.02
Husband's education	-.01	-.04*	.00	.01	—	-.03
<i>Household income:</i>						
High (omitted)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Medium	-.10	-.06	.04	-.26	—	-.06
Low	.08	.08	.11	-.00	—	.36
Possessions index	.07**	.03	.09*	.11	—	-.01
Constant	6.51	6.91**	9.00**	5.53**	—	5.19**
R-squared	.42**	.08**	.35**	.34**	—	.41**
No. of observations	5075	979	1839	1269	—	988

\*Significant, .05 level. \*\*Significant, .01 level.

Table 19.3. – Metric regression coefficients for the exposure to coercive interpersonal controls scale regressed onto family and background variables

Predictor variable	All countries	Pakistan	India	Malaysia	Thailand	Philippines
<i>Family measures:</i>						
Marriage duration	.01**	.01	.01	—	.02**	.01
Is wife of head	-.01	-.06	-.02	—	.02	-.00
Related to husband	-.01	-.02	-.02	—	.03	-.14*
Number of children	.02*	.05**	-.01	—	.02	-.00
<i>Couple discusses:</i>						
Fertility matters	.02**	.01	.06**	—	.01	.01
Other matters	.00	.02	-.06**	—	.06**	-.03
<i>Background:</i>						
Woman's age	-.01**	-.02*	-.01	—	-.02**	-.01
Years of education	-.01**	-.02*	-.02*	—	-.01	-.01
Husband's education	-.01**	-.00	-.02**	—	-.01	-.02**
<i>Household income:</i>						
High (omitted)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Medium	.06*	.03	.07	—	.06	.07
Low	.07**	.05	.13*	—	.02	.07
Possessions index	-.03**	-.03	-.01	—	-.04**	-.00
Constant	1.39**	1.32**	1.04**	—	.91**	1.32**
R-squared	.15**	.10**	.11**	—	.07**	.17**
No. of observations				—		

\*Significant, .05 level. \*\*Significant, .01 level.\*

With regard to the household's socioeconomic position in the community, the results in Table 19.3 make clear that SES is strongly and inversely related to experiencing coercive interpersonal controls. Wives who are older, better educated, married to better educated men, and whose households enjoy relatively high incomes and own relatively large numbers of possessions are less likely to experience beatings or intimidation than are wives who are younger, more poorly schooled and who live in poor households. Thus, in many Asian settings, intimidation and beating appear to be behaviors that are encouraged by poverty and ignorance. Perhaps high fertility produces additional strains for the family that help to account for the positive relationship between having large numbers of children and experiencing coercion, at least in Pakistan. In any case, when it comes to living free from coercive interpersonal controls, it would appear that the family's SES is more important than is a woman's position within the family or household.

Before ending this discussion of the regression results, we wish to comment briefly on the role of community and country in determining the three facets of women's autonomy examined in this paper. In order to

understand the role of social context, we regressed the three measures of women’s autonomy onto the community dummy variables without introducing any of the family or personal characteristics. The R-squares from these regressions as well as from the regressions shown in Tables 19.1-19.3 are shown in Table 19.4. These results make two things clear. First, it is evident that social context has a strong role in determining women’s autonomy, especially their economic decision-making power and freedom of movement. In the all-country equations, social context can explain 92% of the variation in women’s economic decision-making power that all variables together are able to explain (i.e., .45/.49). Likewise, social context can explain 95% of the variation in women’s freedom of movement, and 73% of the variation in exposure to coercive interpersonal controls. Thus, the fundamental assumption of this study that social context strongly influences women’s autonomy is confirmed.

Second, however, if one compares the R-squares from the all-countries equations with those from the within-country equations, it becomes evident that *which* social context is most important varies according to the aspect of women’s autonomy one considers. For the economic power scale, the R-square is far larger in the all-country equation than in any of the within-country equations. This suggests that country is a more important context for determining women’s economic decision-making power than is community within countries. The same cannot be said of either freedom of movement or exposure to coercive interpersonal controls. Here, the all-country R-squares are in the same range as at least some of the within-country R-squares. For these aspects of women’s autonomy, then, community within country is as important as is national context. We do not know why this finding holds, but plan to explore it further in future analysis.

Table 19.4. – R-squares from all-country equations containing all predictors versus from equations containing only community and country indicators

Autonomy measure	All predictors	Community/country indicators only					
	All countries	All countries	Pakistan	India	Malaysia	Thailand	Philippines
Economic	.49	.45	.04	.08	.16	.06	.09
Movement	.42	.40	.02	.29	.31	—	.40
Coercion	.15	.11	.04	.07	—	.02	.13

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has briefly explored family correlates of women's autonomy and power in South and Southeast Asia, using specially-collected data from a sample of almost five dozen communities in Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Consistent with the oft-repeated admonition that the « status » of women is a multi-dimensional concept (e.g., Whyte, 1978), the analysis has found differing correlates of the three aspects of married women's autonomy and power examined: economic decision-making power, freedom of movement, and exposure to coercive interpersonal controls in the family. In some cases, the correlates of women's autonomy have also varied by country, a pattern consistent with another frequently made admonition, namely, that women's « status » is context dependent (Mason, 1986). For example, in Pakistan and India, the duration of a woman's marriage and whether she is the wife of the household head are both important for whether she has a say in the family's economic decisions, whereas in the three Southeast Asian countries, a woman's age and educational level are far more important. Thus, in contexts in which traditional family patterns and gender norms give married women little economic decision-making power, the trust and experience accumulated after many years of marriage, and the power a woman acquires by residing as the wife of the household head, both tend to give her a greater voice in financial decisions. In contexts where family patterns and gender norms do not deny family economic power to women nearly as much, however, the extent of their power is determined not so much by the accumulation of marital experience and residence as wife of the head as by personal characteristics such as age and education that give women greater independence and self-confidence.

A somewhat surprising result was that marrying a related man did not enhance women's economic decision-making power. If anything, it detracted from it, especially in social contexts where cross-cousin and uncle-niece marriages are most common. This unanticipated result cannot be explained by a wider age gap between spouses in related marriages, nor by the degree of family traditionalism (as measured by the wife's gender-role attitudes). Regardless of explanation, however, it is evident that marrying a related man does *not* enhance a woman's say in the family's economic decisions, as has been claimed in the past.

Another surprising result was the unexpectedly inverse relationship between women's fertility and both their economic decision-making power and freedom from coercion. It is frequently speculated that fulfilling the traditional obligation to produce children enhances women's autonomy and power, and that high fertility therefore should give women a power "bonus." In our analysis, however, the net relationship of number of children to two of the three measures of autonomy and power was negative, that is, the more children the woman had, the lower was her power or autonomy. There may

be settings (e.g., sub-Saharan Africa) where high fertility indeed gives women additional power or autonomy, but in South and Southeast Asia, this does not appear to be the case. Instead, we speculate that the inverse relationship between fertility and women's autonomy in Asia probably reflects the fertility-inhibiting effects of women's autonomy (Balk, 1994; Mason, 1993; Morgan and Niraula, 1995).

Yet another common speculation that this analysis failed to confirm is that socioeconomic status is inversely related to women's autonomy, especially to their freedom of movement in South Asia. In contexts with norms of female seclusion, or where female idleness is used as an important symbol of a family's high economic status, it is frequently speculated that women in well-off families will enjoy less personal autonomy and power than women from poor families (Mason, 1987), a finding confirmed in some analyses (Balk, 1996). In our analysis, however, the socioeconomic status of families and of women themselves was either positively related or unrelated to their personal autonomy and power. Indeed, in the case of women's exposure to coercive family controls, it was evident that coming from a high status family was one of the single most important *protections* against family coercion. Again, there may be contexts in which a high socioeconomic status reduces women's autonomy, but it does not appear to do so in much of South and Southeast Asia.

The analysis presented in this paper has made clear that social context is very powerful in explaining variation in women's autonomy and power. One of the most important questions that remains to be answered, however, is *why* social context is important. We were able to ascertain that most of the social variation in women's economic decision-making power occurs between countries rather than within them. For freedom of movement and exposure to coercive interpersonal controls, however, there was as much intra-country as inter-country variation. Especially when it comes to variation within countries, whether it is religious differences among communities, differences in their treatment of girls *vis-à-vis* schooling, employment or health care, or differing attitudes about the roles of husbands and wives that makes a difference for wives' autonomy and power remains to be explored. Future analysis in the current project will focus on this question.

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