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# OCCASIONAL PAPERS 2



**Demographic  
and Health  
Surveys**

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## **Autonomy and Egyptian Women: Findings from the 1988 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey**

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**AUTONOMY AND EGYPTIAN WOMEN:  
FINDINGS FROM THE 1988 EGYPT  
DEMOGRAPHIC AND HEALTH SURVEY**

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January 1995

The recommended citation for this publication is:

Kishor, Sunita. 1995. *Autonomy and Egyptian Women: Findings from the 1988 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey*. Occasional Papers No. 2. Calverton, Maryland: Macro International Inc.

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## **Acknowledgments**

This research was carried out primarily with funds provided to the Demographic and Health Surveys project by the Office of Women in Development (WID) of the United States Agency for International Development. I am grateful to Debra Schumann for her interest in the research and her helpful comments. The research also benefitted substantially from suggestions made by Ann Blanc, Ann Way, Anastasia Gage, and Pav Govindasamy. Aylene Kovensky patiently edited the work and Betty Thomas provided secretarial support.



## **Executive Summary**

### **Autonomy and Egyptian Women**

In this study, data from the 1988 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS-1988) are used to explore the multidimensionality of Egyptian women's autonomy. Three indices—the customary autonomy index, the noncustomary autonomy index, and the realized autonomy index—each measuring a different dimension of autonomy, are defined. The customary autonomy index measures the extent to which a woman believes that the wife should have a decision-making role in matters related to children, and the noncustomary autonomy index measures the extent to which she believes that the wife should have a decision-making role in areas of family life not specifically concerned with children. The realized autonomy index, on the other hand, measures the amount of control a woman actually has over her life, in terms both of the weight given to her opinions within the household relative to those of her husband and her degree of freedom of movement. These three indices of autonomy have been used to perform two separate analyses. The first examines whether the different dimensions of women's autonomy as measured by the three indices are equally associated with two demographic outcomes, i.e., the use of contraception by women and the survival of children up to the age of five. The second identifies factors that explain the cross-sectional variation in each separate index of autonomy. The latter analysis is done by using ordered logit estimation techniques and regressing each index of autonomy on several modernization, economic and cultural factors as well as on the other two dimensions of autonomy.

In keeping with the multidimensionality of women's autonomy, only moderate amounts of correlation between the three indices of autonomy have been found. Also, although the customary autonomy of Egyptian women appears to be high, their noncustomary autonomy and realized autonomy are not. Specifically, over 50% of Egyptian women had the highest possible score on the customary autonomy index, while only 12% had the highest possible score on the noncustomary autonomy index, and 17% had the highest score on the realized autonomy index.

High scores on all three indices are found to be associated with a higher use of modern contraceptives and a lower probability of having any children die before age five at each parity. This suggests that even in patriarchal societies such as Egypt, where autonomy may not be a culturally coveted female trait, higher female autonomy is positively associated with socially desirable demographic outcomes. Notably, customary autonomy, the one dimension of autonomy that typically is high among Egyptian women, has the weakest association with the use of modern contraceptives and zero infant deaths at each parity, and noncustomary autonomy, the dimension on which high scores are rare among Egyptian women, has the most positive and consistent association with these desired demographic outcomes.

Further, the different dimensions of autonomy are not affected in the same way by the same explanatory factors. Nevertheless, several modernization and economic variables have a positive and significant association with all three indices, although the strength of the association usually is the least for the customary autonomy index. On average, the greater the wealth of a household, the greater the exposure of the woman to the outside world through television viewing, and the more educated the woman and her husband, the greater is her probability of scoring high on all three indices. Of these variables, the impact of the husband's education is the greatest on women's scores on the realized autonomy index, and that of hours spent viewing television and women's own education is greatest on the noncustomary autonomy index. There is little difference in the impact of socio-economic status on the three indices. These results suggest that modernization efforts that affect women directly, for example, by increasing their level of education, affect women's autonomy most by altering their views about the role of wives in decision-making; modernization

efforts that affect women indirectly, for example, by raising the level of education of husbands, affect most their realized level of autonomy.

Urban living, especially current residence in urban areas, is found to be conducive to higher scores on noncustomary autonomy. However, urban living does not necessarily imply higher levels of customary and realized autonomy. Specifically, women living in the Urban Governorates, despite higher levels of noncustomary autonomy, have a much lower level of realized autonomy than women from all other areas with the exception of rural Upper Egypt. On the other hand, women living in both rural and urban Upper Egypt have a higher probability of scoring low on customary autonomy than women in other parts of Egypt. This suggests that perhaps the normative level of autonomy in decision-making with regard to children is lower in Upper Egypt than in other parts of the country.

Exposure to urban living before the age of twelve positively affects women's scores on the two indices measuring women's views on decision-making autonomy, while leaving their scores on realized autonomy unaffected. On the one hand, this result emphasizes the innovative nature of high scores on noncustomary autonomy. On the other, it suggests that the norm of high levels of customary autonomy is reinforced by early socialization in urban, rather than rural, living. Women who have spent most of their lives in the place of interview, are found to have significantly lower levels only of realized autonomy. Since neither customary nor noncustomary autonomy is affected by recent migration, the positive association of realized autonomy with migration is more likely to be due to the greater need for freedom of movement among migrant women than to the greater exposure of migrants to new ways of doing things.

The impact of women's employment on autonomy also differs for each dimension of autonomy. Only realized autonomy is higher among women who work, irrespective of whether or not they control their earnings or earn cash for their work. In contrast, whether women who work differ significantly in terms of their customary and noncustomary autonomy from those who do not work depends on whether the work is for earnings or not and the degree of control over earnings. In comparison with women who do not work at all, noncustomary autonomy is higher only among women who work and give most of their earnings to their families, and customary autonomy is higher only among women who work and keep most of their earnings for themselves. Women who are employed without cash earnings have a lower level of both customary and noncustomary autonomy than women who do not work at all.

Together these results imply that autonomy as measured by perceptions about women's decision-making roles is not affected by employment per se, but by access to, and control over, earnings derived from employment. Working without earnings consistently undermines women's perceptions about the control women should have over decision-making in both traditional and nontraditional realms. However, if women earn, more control over earnings does not necessarily imply that women will favor greater female input in decision-making in the nontraditional realm. Rather, the results suggest that more control over earnings translates into an increase in the likelihood that women will want to control decisions in their traditional areas of influence. On the other hand, the higher realized autonomy of women who are employed, irrespective of earnings and earnings control, may be due to their greater necessity for freedom of movement, a need that is unlikely to be mediated by earnings.

The study finds that few cultural variables affect any of the aspects of autonomy directly. Realized autonomy alone is lower among women who are Muslim, who live in large, perhaps non-nuclear households, and who have been married more than once. The lower realized autonomy of remarried women warns us against transplanting cultural conceptions acquired in one cultural setting to another. This warning is also relevant for assumptions about the impact of age at marriage on autonomy. The higher the age at first marriage the lower (not higher, as should be expected) the probability of high scores on noncustomary autonomy.

The co-residence of husband's relatives is directly associated with lower levels of noncustomary autonomy but not with women's realized autonomy levels. Taken together, these results suggest that co-residence of in-laws may not *cause* women's autonomy to be lower, but that women who co-reside with their husband's relatives may be more likely to have traditional views about women's roles.

Given the patriarchal basis of the Egyptian family, the number of children, especially sons, was expected to enhance women's autonomy. Instead, the higher the number of sons and daughters a woman has, the higher the probability, on average, of her scoring low, especially on customary autonomy. This finding corroborates the positive relationship of high fertility with low women's status, and suggests that higher fertility lowers women's autonomy even in their traditional areas of influence.

Finally, controlling for modernization, economic, and cultural factors, all aspects of autonomy are found to be positively and significantly related to one another. Importantly, however, changes in noncustomary autonomy affect the other two aspects of autonomy the most. Thus, while the three dimensions of autonomy tend to go together, on average, women who score high on the noncustomary autonomy index are more likely to also score high on the other two dimensions of autonomy, than women who score high on either customary autonomy or realized autonomy.

The following findings:

- noncustomary autonomy is the one aspect of autonomy that is most consistently related to socially desired demographic outcomes,
- when scores on the noncustomary autonomy index are high, scores on other dimensions of autonomy are also most likely to be high, and
- noncustomary autonomy, more than any other aspect of autonomy, is most consistently related to modernization influences

together yield an important policy conclusion. They suggest that even without making difficult and often culturally less desirable changes to the kinship structure, all dimensions of women's autonomy can be enhanced by manipulating the modernization variables, variables that are, happily, most amenable to policy manipulation.

