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Discussion Paper 200

Is Greater Decisionmaking Power of Women Associated with Reduced Gender Discrimination in South Asia?

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In South Asia, where discrimination against women and girls is strong, women's health, life expectancy, education, and economic outlook are all negatively affected. Inadequate medical care and nutritionally inferior diets for many women result in poor health and babies with low birth weight, which affects future generations. The preference for sons causes population sex ratios to be skewed in many South Asian countries, by infanticide in some cases and in recent years by abortion of female children, leading to a shortage of women in population statistics. At the national level, efforts to reduce poverty and increase the pace of economic development are hindered by gender discrimination. But even in South Asia, where women often have little say about their own lives, they are the main caretakers of their children.

A number of studies have shown that when women's decisionmaking power within households increases, they use it to direct more household resources toward the care and feeding of their children. Health and nutritional status of children improves. But in South Asia, where women and girls are undervalued and sons are preferred, will women use increased power to improve the well-being of both girl and boy children? Or will they use their newfound power to perpetuate the pattern of discrimination? This is the key question asked by this paper.

Background

There are at least three circumstances under which increasing women's power may reduce discrimination against girl children: (1) they may use their power altruistically to improve the well-being of all of their children, regardless of gender; (2) women who are better educated and spend more time outside of the home may become aware of gender inequalities and subsequently have a growing sense of responsibility for remedying them in their own households; or (3) if women have same-sex preferences and thus favor their own gender, they may tend to allocate increased resources under their control toward girls.

A key reason that mothers prefer to invest in boys more than girls is a perception that the returns are higher from boy children when they become adults. Overcoming this perception will require increasing the economic returns to investments in girls.

While women may take action to improve the lot of girl children for any of these reasons, it is not inevitable that they will do so. In many countries where males are favored—East Asian as well as South Asian—increased education and economic participation of women have not corrected natality and mortality inequalities. Mothers may favor sons over daughters because sons are expected to care for their mothers in old age. A variety of studies from developing countries around the world have shown no consistent pattern of mothers' and fathers' investment in children by gender.

Methodology

This research uses data from Demographic and Health Surveys conducted in the 1990s in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. The sample includes 33,316 children below three years of age and 30,334 women-husband pairs. To detect gender discrimination, the study compares the mean nutritional status of girls and boys 0 to 3 years old. To determine whether it is associated with increases in women's decisionmaking power, it looks at whether the nutritional status of girls improves more than that of boys when women gain in decisionmaking power. If so, it seems likely that women are using their power to reduce gender inequality, which will benefit future generations as well as the girls of today.

Children's height-for-age Z-score (HAZ) is used to measure nutritional status. A child whose HAZ is two standard deviations below the National Center for Health Statistics/World Health Organization international growth reference is considered to be stunted, a sign of long-term inadequate nutrition or poor health.

Three kinds of evidence indicate a woman's relative decisionmaking power: *direct evidence*, which comes from surveys of the nature of decisionmaking in households, including control of resources, women's autonomy, and women's and men's attitudes on gender roles; *source indicators* of power, such as education, employment, media exposure, earnings, and asset ownership, and *setting indicators*, which demonstrate the environment a couple lives in, including customs and norms regarding marriage, differences in age and education, and the degree of communication in the marriage.

To measure a woman's decisionmaking power relative to her husband's, this study relies on four source and setting indicators: (1) whether the woman works for cash income, (2) the woman's age at first marriage, (3) the percent difference in the woman's and her husband's age, and (4) the difference in the woman's and her husband's years of education. Factor analysis is used to combine the indicators into an index. Following, multivariate regression analysis, with boys' and girls' nutritional status as the dependent variables, is used to test for the association between women's decisionmaking power and boys' and girls' nutrition status. The analysis is conducted first for the four study countries as a group and then for each

country individually. Differences in findings across age groups (0-1, 1-2, and 2-3 year olds) and across regions in the country with the largest sample, India, are then examined.

Findings

Gender discrimination is indeed evident in South Asia. It is the biological norm for infant boys to be more vulnerable to poor nutritional status than girls, yet girls are found to be doing the same or worse than boys, when they should be doing better. At an age when biological differences usually disappear, girls in South Asia are clearly worse off than their male counterparts. Gender discrimination is found to be the greatest in India and Nepal, and to not be evident among young children in Pakistan.

Turning to the question of whether there is a gender difference in the effect of women's relative decisionmaking power on child nutritional status, the study finds that increased power of women does have a positive effect on the nutritional status of both boys and girls. The results imply that for South Asia as a whole, an increase of women's power—if quite substantial—would be an effective force for reducing discrimination against girls. However, this finding is not applicable in all countries and for all areas and age groups of children within them. Pakistan is the only country for which there is strong evidence that increases in women's power benefit girls more than boys. While the finding does not apply for Bangladesh at the country level, it does for 1-2 year old Bangladeshi children. Within India, it is found that it applies only for the region comprising the eastern and southern states. Furthermore, in two cases, evidence is found that increases in women's relative decisionmaking power can be expected to worsen discrimination against girl children. The first is for 0-1 year old children in Bangladesh. The second is for the northern and western states of India, with particularly strong evidence for the northern state of Haryana.

Conclusions

The lesson for policymakers and development practitioners is that increasing women's decisionmaking power well may improve the well-being of children, but it will not necessarily end discrimination against females. Women will continue to invest more in sons as long as the perception persists that boys yield higher returns when they become adults. To overcome this perception, the economic returns to investment in girls must rise. To accomplish this, governments must increase incentives to send girls to school, they must remove barriers to women's participation in the labor force, and they must implement social security systems that lessen parents' reliance on children for old-age support.

However, at the root of son preference are long-standing, deeply embedded cultural and social influences, such as customs regarding marriage and inheritance associated with patriarchal kinship systems. These influences govern values that act as constraints to reducing discrimination against girls that increases in women's power may not be sufficient to overcome. A fundamental change in values will require policy measures that address patriarchal customs. Legislative reform to equalize civil, political economic, social, and cultural rights, including rights to asset inheritance and ownership and voting rights, are fundamental in this endeavor. Also important are continued efforts to eliminate the practice of dowry. Measures to protect women's mobility and their physical and emotional safety would increase their access to new information and enable them to formulate and express nontraditional values without fear of retribution.

Keywords: gender discrimination, nutritional status, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan

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