

Focus:

Women's work,
autonomy and social
norms



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Since the 1990s, women's empowerment, defined by the World Bank as "enhancing [women's] capacity to make choices and transform choices into desired actions and outcomes" (Aslop *et al.*, 2006) has become a full-fledged development goal.¹ Millennium Development Goal 3, for example, is "Promote gender equality and empower women".

One oft-cited means of empowering women is improving their access to the labour market. Having a job allows women to earn independent income, which reduces dependence on their spouse. This positive link between work and autonomy is also often evident in the cross-sectional data, without the possibility of drawing "causal" conclusions. In other words, we cannot conclude that more work generates more autonomy. Other factors, which have or have yet to be observed, may be causing this relationship. Education, for example, is one such factor in certain contexts, since higher education levels may be linked to a higher participation of women in the labour market and greater autonomy in some countries.

Although this difficulty in identifying a causal relationship between women's work and autonomy can be resolved by using relevant econometric tools,² it is also important to view women's work within a social context. In some countries, women's work is frowned upon for a wide range of reasons. In Germany, for example, the term "Rabenmutter", which translates as "mother raven", is a derogatory term for a working woman with young children (see the [French Wikipedia page](#) on this issue), who is perceived as putting her personal interests (her career, her independence, etc.) before the interests of her children (being with their mother).

In an article published in *Economica* in 2023, co-authored with Catherine Bros (Université de Tours) and François Maniquet (CORE, Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium),³ we reflect on the role of social norms in the link between women's work and autonomy in India. We focus on a

¹See the article by Anne-Emmanuelle Calvès, "Empowerment: The History of a Key Concept in Contemporary Development Discourse", published in the journal *Tiers-Monde* for a historical and critical perspective of the term "empowerment" and its use in the context of development.

²Voir par exemple Anderson et Eswaran (2009) qui étudient le lien entre autonomisation et travail des femmes au Bangladesh.

³Bros, C., Gille, V., & Maniquet, F. (2023). Female labour, status and decision power. *Economica*, 90(358), 453-476.

specific dimension of autonomy: the ability to participate in household decisions. The context in India is particularly interesting since women's participation has remained very low and stable since the 1980s, despite a decline in fertility, and an increase in household income and women's education levels (Klasen & Pieters, 2015). The role of social norms in the participation of women in the labour market in India (Dean & Jayachandran, 2019, Fiel *et al.*, 2021), and outside India (see Jayachandran's excellent literature review, 2021) has already been widely discussed. However, prior to our article, their role in the link between women's work and autonomy had only been examined through the notion of backlash, defined as a violent reaction to a given behaviour (Krishnan *et al.*, 2010; Heath, 2014; Bhalotra *et al.*, 2021).

In our article "Female labour, status and decision power," we study how women's intra-household decision-making power varies according to their labour supply. We consider the extensive (women entering or leaving the labour market) and intensive margin of labour supply (increase or decrease of their working time), and five different decision-making powers. "Routine" decisions, in which we expect little variation, since these prerogatives are traditionally reserved for women in India: what to cook on a daily basis, what to do if one of the children is sick; and "bigger" decisions about large expenses, household fertility, and children's marriage. Our analysis is based on the two waves of panel data from the nationally representative India Human Development Survey (IHDS) conducted in 2005-2006 and 2011-2012 on more than 40,000 households. The panel structure used for this data allows us to exclude all time-fixed factors that could be confusing in the relationship between women's work and autonomy.

Our econometric analysis is counterintuitive in that it reveals that when a woman's labour supply *increased* from one wave to the next, her decision-making power in the home *decreased* on average. With our theoretical intra-household bargaining model, we show that this negative relationship between women's work and decision-making power can be linked to the existence of social norms in relation to women's work. In the Indian context, a working woman's spouse experiences disapproval from his community, since he is perceived as not being able to support his family on his own (Bernhardt *et al.*, 2018). This negative perception of the spouse generates an (intangible) cost, which must be compensated within the household, to counteract the spouse's loss in utility. In our model, this loss is compensated through decision power, which is also a determinant of utility. In other words, a woman who works more loses decision-making power

within her household to compensate for her husband's loss of utility caused by his decrease in social status.

This theoretical mechanism has two implications which we demonstrate empirically. Firstly, the negative relationship between decision-making power and women's work is stronger in places where the cost of social norms is higher. Although there is no household survey that measured the prevalence of this norm based on geographical location or the socioeconomic status of households, we assume that the cost is higher in the country than in cities, on the one hand because the behaviour of individuals is more easily observable in rural areas than in urban areas, and on the other because rural areas tend to be more conservative than urban areas. And, as expected, we demonstrate that the negative relationship we observe exists only in rural areas. Secondly, the relationship between women's work and decision-making power is "more" negative when her work grants her status. She gains utility through the status earned through her work, whereas her spouse loses utility since his status decreases. The fact that she is working must therefore be doubly compensated in terms of decision-making power. And the data confirmed that this negative relationship does not exist for households in which women work as agricultural labourers, since this occupation does not add to her status.

Our article therefore challenges the common view that associates women's work with increased autonomy. The context, including existing social norms, must be taken into account in any public policy aimed at increasing women's autonomy or participation in the labour market. However, it is important to note that the loss of decision-making power does not necessarily translate into a loss of utility for women. The loss of utility linked to the woman's loss of autonomy does not necessarily compensate for her gain of utility linked to her participation in the labour market.

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