

Chapter 2

Defining Alternative Measures of Autonomy

The data used in this study are from the standard recode file of the Egypt Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) conducted in late 1988.¹ This survey sampled a total of 8911 ever-married women in Egypt of whom 8219 were currently married. Earlier research suggested the usefulness of these data for examining women's status issues (Govindasamy and Malhotra, 1994).

The EDHS included a range of questions regarding women's perceptions of who *should have* and who *does have* decision-making powers within the family, as well as questions on the freedom of women to go outside the home. These questions are combined into three different indices of autonomy and are listed in Table 2.1. The questions on the autonomy of women were asked only of currently married women; therefore the analysis is restricted to this subsample.

The questions on who should have decision-making powers within the family were grouped according to whether they concerned the procreation and rearing of children or whether they addressed other areas of family life not specifically concerned with children. Since the care of children, and to a lesser extent the decisions surrounding contraception and procreation, fall within the domestic realm over which women traditionally have had some control, the former group of questions were combined to form the index of customary autonomy. The questions not specifically concerned with family planning or children were combined to form the index of noncustomary autonomy. The latter index measures the extent to which women believe that women should have decision-making powers in general, as well as in areas such as household finances, which are outside their traditional realm of influence. The expectation is that more women are likely to score high on the customary autonomy index, which measures women's views on women's control over decision-making in their traditional domestic domain, than on the noncustomary autonomy index, which measures women's belief that women should have decision-making powers in areas not traditionally within their domain of influence.

The questions on who is perceived by the respondent to actually have decision-making power within the family and who decides on whether the respondent is allowed freedom of movement outside the home were combined to form the index of realized autonomy. This index reflects the actual amount of autonomy women have rather than the amount they believe women should have.

Along with the list of questions used to construct the indices, Table 2.1 provides the weight given to each response, which, depending on the response, is either 1 or 0. The index value for every woman is the sum of the weights of her responses. The minimum value for all three indices is 0. The maximum is 4 for the indices of customary autonomy and realized autonomy (since they are based on four questions each) and 5 for the noncustomary autonomy index (which is based on 5 questions).

The responses "wife" and "both" to all four questions used to construct the customary autonomy index and to the first three questions used to construct the noncustomary autonomy index are both assigned a weight of 1. This assignment of weights does not distinguish between women who believe that wives

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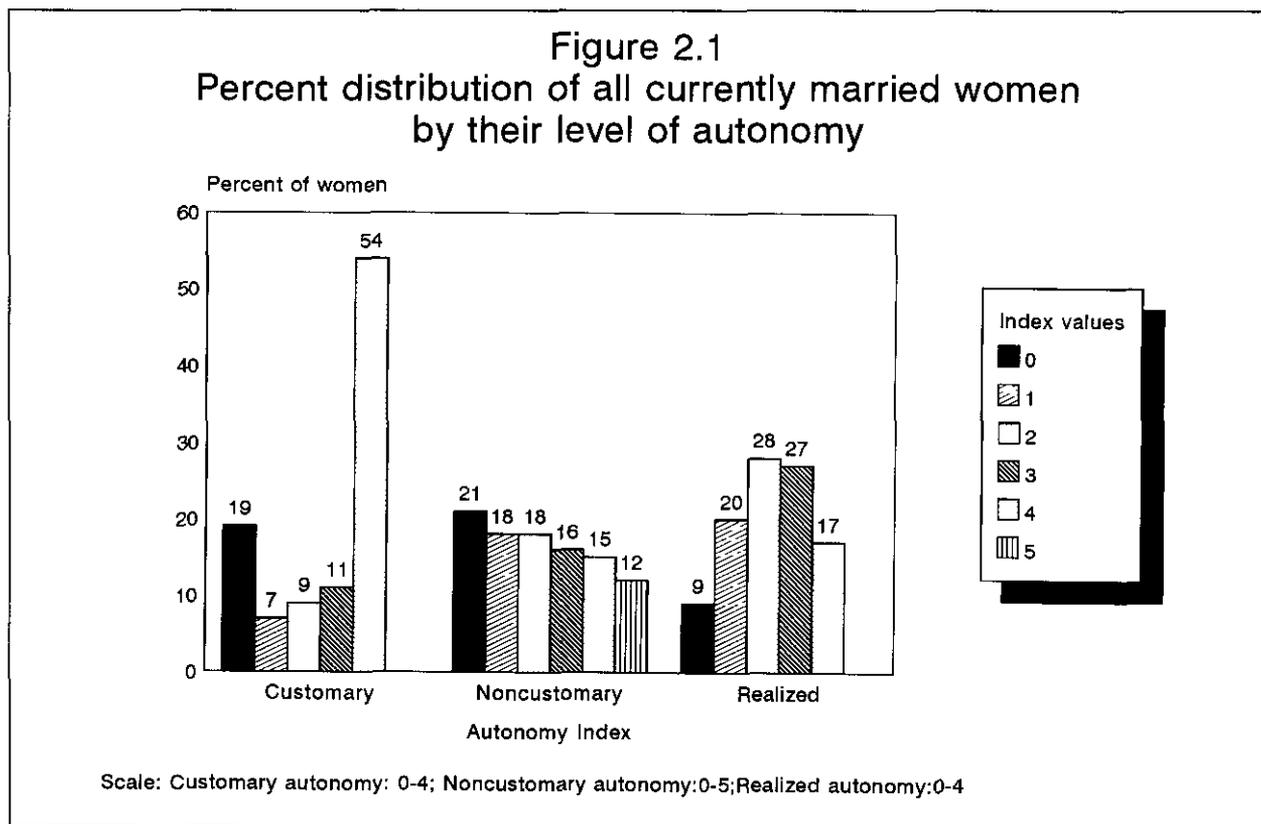
Table 2.1 Questions used and weights given to each possible response when constructing the autonomy indices

Questions	Possible responses	Weight given to each response
<u>Customary Autonomy Index</u> Index measuring the extent to which women believe that they should have the last word in family planning, in the decision to have another child, and in their children's education and marriage.		
• Who should have the last word on the following -- the husband, the wife, both, or someone else?		
- Having another child	Husband Wife Both Other	0 1 1 0
- Children's education	Same as above	Same as above
- Children's marriage plans	Same as above	Same as above
- Use of family planning methods	Same as above	Same as above
<u>Noncustomary Autonomy Index</u> Index measuring the extent to which women believe that women should have decision-making powers in general and in areas outside their traditional roles		
• Who should have the last word on the following -- the husband, the wife, both, or someone else?		
- Visits to friends or relatives	Same as above	Same as above
- Household budget	Same as above	Same as above
- Lending or borrowing	Same as above	Same as above
• Now I would like to talk to you about a different topic. In general if a wife disagrees with her husband should she keep quiet or speak up?	Keep quiet Speak up Not sure/Don't know	0 1 0
• Do you think a wife respects a husband more if he insists she accepts his opinion in everything or if he listens to and accepts her opinions?	Insists on his opinion Listens and accepts her opinion Not sure/Don't know	0 1 0
<u>Realized Autonomy Index</u> Index measuring the extent to which women perceive that they have decision-making powers and their freedom of movement.		
• In your home, does your point of view carry the same weight as your husband's, less weight than his point of view, or isn't it taken into account at all?	Same weight as husband Less weight than husband Not taken into account at all Other	1 0 0 0
• Do you go out with your husband to purchase major household items/clothing?	Yes No	1 0
• Does your husband allow you to go out alone or with your children to buy household items?	Yes alone Yes with children Not allowed Other	1 0 0 0
• Does your husband allow you to go out alone or with your children to visit relatives or friends?	Yes alone Yes with children Not allowed Other	1 0 0 0

should have sole decision-making powers and women who believe that wives should share such powers equally with their husbands. The rationale for taking this approach rather than one that weights only the response "wife" as 1 is two-fold: a) in a strongly patriarchal society such as Egypt, the belief that women should have decision-making powers at least equal to their husbands, while being clearly less innovative than a belief that women should have sole power is, nonetheless, a significantly strong indication of women's believing that they should control important aspects of their lives; and b) since the questions refer to decisions about the welfare of the family and not about the welfare of the woman alone, an answer that does not give sole power to either husband or wife, but gives it jointly to both seems a reasonable expression of autonomy within a conjugal and familial context. For the construction of the realized autonomy index, a woman is considered to have autonomy only if she is allowed to go out alone and if her opinion carries as much weight as her husband's (i.e., the maximum weight allowed by the question).

The different aspects of the autonomy of women as measured by the three indices are only moderately correlated. The highest correlation, 0.54, is between the indices of noncustomary autonomy and customary autonomy. The correlation of the indices of noncustomary autonomy and customary autonomy with the index of realized autonomy is lower, at 0.46 and 0.34, respectively. The moderate correlations among the three indices support the assumption that the three indices are tapping distinct dimensions of the autonomy of Egyptian women.

Figure 2.1 shows how women are distributed across the values of each of the three indices. As expected, more women are likely to believe that women should have at least an equal say in matters related to children than in matters not related to children. In fact, over 50% of the women score the maximum value on the index of customary autonomy as compared to only 12% on the index of noncustomary autonomy.



However, it is notable that almost one fifth of women believe that women should not have any control in decision-making even with regard to the procreation and lives of children. A similar proportion of women do not believe that women should have control in areas not concerned with children. The distribution of women across the values of the index of realized autonomy approximates a normal curve; most women are likely to have a medium level of autonomy.