

Chapter 6

Conclusions

This analysis has yielded several insights, some expected and others unexpected, into the association of different facets of autonomy with desired demographic outcomes and into the factors that underlie the variation in autonomy among Egyptian women. Because these insights have applicability beyond the specific case of Egypt let us pull them together and examine the lessons that can be learnt.

As researchers have repeatedly found, there is no one measure of autonomy. In this analysis we used three different measures and found them to be only moderately correlated with one another. Despite this, high scores on all three measures were found to be associated with a higher use of modern contraceptives and a lower probability of having any children die before the age of 5 at each parity. Thus, to answer a question that we posed at the beginning of this study, even in societies where female autonomy may not be a coveted female trait, higher female autonomy, however measured, is positively associated with favored demographic outcomes. However, if all aspects of autonomy are similarly related to demographic behavior, does it matter which aspect of autonomy we try to manipulate in order to achieve desired demographic outcomes? This analysis was not a multivariate causal analysis of demographic outcomes; consequently it cannot be used to answer this question conclusively. Nonetheless, the analysis does suggest that of the three indices of customary autonomy, noncustomary autonomy, and realized autonomy, the index measuring women's views on who should have decision-making control in the domestic sphere (customary autonomy index) had the weakest association with the use of modern contraceptives and zero infant deaths at each parity, and the index measuring women's views of decision-making control in areas not traditionally open to women (noncustomary autonomy index) appeared to have the most consistently positive association.

The relatively weak relationship of the customary autonomy index with demographic outcomes may in part be due to the fact that a high score on the customary autonomy index is not really telling us much about the woman other than that she is not different from most other women. Indeed, two out of three women had a score of 3 or 4 on the customary autonomy index, suggesting that the belief that women should have at least an equal say in matters related to the lives of children, family planning and having another child is a norm rather than an innovation among Egyptian women. By contrast, only 17% of all women get the highest score on the realized autonomy index, and even fewer score high on the noncustomary autonomy index.

The relative importance of the three aspects of autonomy is only relevant if we find that they are affected by different factors or by the same factors in different ways. If they are affected by the same factors in the same way, then manipulating these factors should increase the level of all three indices simultaneously. Our cross-sectional examination of factors underlying the variation in customary, noncustomary, and realized autonomy revealed only few factors that were consistently and significantly related to all three aspects of autonomy. In addition, we found that there were some factors that either did not affect views on women's relative power in decision-making, but did affect realized autonomy, or were associated in one direction with the former while being associated in the other direction with the latter. In other words, while most factors have a similar impact on the indices of customary autonomy and noncustomary autonomy, they do not always have the same impact on the realized autonomy index.

A number of the modernization and economic variables have the predicted significant association with all three indices, although, for most variables, the strength of the association 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, and the more educated the woman and her husband, the greater is her

probability of scoring high on all three aspects of autonomy. Interestingly, of these, the impact of the husband's education is clearly the greatest on women's scores on the realized autonomy index, and that of exposure and women's education is greatest on the noncustomary autonomy index. There is little difference in the impact of socioeconomic status on the three indices. Thus, it appears that modernization efforts that affect a women's individual characteristics impact on women most by altering their views about women's role in decision-making; modernization efforts that affect the circumstances in which women live, such as the level of education of her husband, affect her realized level of autonomy most.

In keeping with the stronger impact of modernization variables on noncustomary autonomy we find that urban living, especially current residence in urban areas, is more conducive to scoring higher on noncustomary autonomy. Interestingly, however, urban living does not necessarily imply higher levels of 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, Upper Egypt as a whole has women who tend to score lower on customary autonomy than women in other parts of Egypt. This suggests that perhaps the norm for autonomy in decision-making with regard to children is lower in Upper Egypt than in other parts of the country.

Interestingly, early exposure to urban living affects women's scores on the 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 a high level of customary autonomy is reinforced by early socialization in urban rather than rural living. Further, the lack of any effect of early exposure to urban living on realized autonomy once more suggests that individual-level characteristics affect a woman's exercise of autonomy least. In this context, we believe that the greater realized autonomy of women who have been recent migrants derives not from the greater exposure to new ways of doing things (for that should have affected noncustomary autonomy too) but from the greater need for freedom of movement among migrant women.

The impact of employment on autonomy is different for each dimension of autonomy. Realized autonomy is the only aspect that is higher among women who work, irrespective of whether they control their earnings or not, and whether they earn cash or not for the work they do. By contrast, 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 lower levels 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 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. Indeed, the results suggest that more control over earnings translates into an increase in the likelihood that women will want more control over decisions in their traditional areas of influence.

Irrespective of earnings and earnings control, employment is positively associated with realized autonomy. Keeping in mind that the realized autonomy index is largely a measure of women's freedom of movement, this positive association is likely to be a consequence of the greater necessity for freedom of

movement among women who work. Note that this greater need for freedom of movement is unlikely to be mediated by earnings.

Surprisingly, only a few cultural variables affect any of the aspects of autonomy directly. Controlling for modernization factors, we find that realized autonomy is lower among women who are Muslim, who live in large, perhaps non-nuclear households and who are remarried. Although the first two effects are as hypothesized, being remarried does not, as expected, translate into more autonomy. Indeed, the lower probability of realized autonomy among women who have been married more than once warns us against transplanting conceptions about cultural phenomena acquired in one cultural setting to another.

This warning is also relevant for assumptions about the impact of age at marriage on autonomy. We find that women who have married late have a lower, not a higher (as predicted), probability of scoring high on the noncustomary autonomy index. Indeed, depending on the cultural context, an older age at marriage, especially controlling for education and other modernization correlates of an older age at marriage, may have a negative impact on self-worth with consequent effects on autonomy.

Our hypotheses that the co-residence of husband's relatives would be associated with lower levels of autonomy, and the co-residence of the woman's own relatives would be associated with higher levels of autonomy, were upheld not for realized autonomy but for noncustomary autonomy. This suggests that the co-residence of in-laws is not causally related to autonomy. Instead the association may be due to the fact that women who co-reside with their husband's relatives are more likely to be the ones who have traditional views.

Given the patriarchal basis of the Egyptian family, our expectation was that the number of children, especially sons, would enhance women's autonomy. This expectation is not upheld. Indeed, the greater the number of sons, as well as the greater the number of daughters, the lower the probability of having high scores, especially on customary autonomy. This finding re-emphasizes the negative relationship of fertility with women's status. In addition, it suggests that higher fertility lowers women's autonomy even in their traditional areas of influence.

Finally, controlling for all other modernization, economic and cultural factors, we found that all aspects of autonomy are positively and significantly related to one another; however, changes in noncustomary autonomy affect the other two aspects of autonomy the most. This suggests that whereas the three aspects of autonomy tend to go together, high levels of all facets of autonomy are more likely to be found in a woman who has a high score on the noncustomary autonomy index than if she displays high levels of either customary autonomy or realized autonomy.

The following findings together yield an important policy conclusion:

- Noncustomary autonomy is the one aspect of autonomy that is most consistently related to 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.
- Noncustomary autonomy, more than any other aspect of autonomy, is most consistently related to modernization influences, especially as embodied in individual characteristics.

They suggest that even without making difficult and often undesired changes to the kinship structure, all aspects of autonomy can be most easily increased by manipulating the modernization variables, variables that are, happily, most amenable to policy manipulation.