

Women's Autonomy in India and Pakistan: The Influence of Religion and Region

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THE CULTURES OF South Asia are largely gender stratified, characterized by patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence, inheritance and succession practices that exclude women, and hierarchical relations in which the patriarch or his relatives have authority over family members. Levels and patterns of female autonomy vary considerably within the region, however, and the question is why. Two arguments have been advanced in the literature to support the hypothesis that women in Pakistan have less autonomy and control over their own lives than do women in India. The first argues that in Pakistan as in other Islamic settings, women occupy a separate and distinctive position that effectively denies them education and autonomy. Women's lack of control over their own lives has been cited as the central factor underlying the poorer mortality outcomes experienced by Islamic societies (Caldwell 1986: 175). The second argument draws on research conducted in India that demonstrates the dominant influence of behavior and norms imprinted by regionally prescribed social systems, and points out that the social systems that characterize the southern region provide women more exposure to the outside world, more voice in family life, and more freedom of movement than do the social systems of the north (Dyson and Moore 1983; Basu 1992; Jejeebhoy 2000). In this view, to which we subscribe, region plays the major conditioning role, and once region is controlled, Muslim women exert about as much autonomy in their lives as do Hindu women, wherever they reside. The argument in favor of regional social systems as opposed to religion as the driving force is strengthened by evidence suggesting wide variations in the ways in which gender and behavioral norms are manifested across a range of Islamic countries (see for example, Obermeyer 1992).

This article explores these assertions empirically, using data drawn from India and Pakistan. First, we compare the lives of women in three settings—one (Punjab) in Pakistan, the other two (Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu) in north and south India respectively—and assess similarities and differences in women's autonomy. Second, we examine the extent to which levels of autonomy are in fact explained by such commonly available measures of autonomy as education and economic activity, and such traditional providers of status as age and residence patterns. And third, we explore the contextual factors underlying observed differences. In particular we try to ascertain whether differences in women's autonomy are attributable to religion, to nationality, or to the north–south cultural difference that has been widely acknowledged within India and that can be investigated with the inclusion of data from Pakistan as an additional cultural identity in the subcontinent.

Autonomy has been variously defined as “the ability...to obtain information and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one's private concerns and those of one's intimates” (Dyson and Moore 1983: 45); and “the degree of women's access to (and control over) material resources (including food, income, land, and other forms of wealth) and to social resources (including knowledge, power, and prestige) within the family, in the community, and in the society at large” (Dixon 1978: 6). We define autonomy here as the control women have over their own lives—the extent to which they have an equal voice with their husbands in matters affecting themselves and their families, control over material and other resources, access to knowledge and information, the authority to make independent decisions, freedom from constraints on physical mobility, and the ability to forge equitable power relationships within families.

Data are drawn from surveys designed explicitly to measure women's status, and they pertain to women residing in three culturally distinct sites of South Asia—(1) a rural and periurban setting in the patriarchal Punjab Province, in Pakistan; (2) an equally patriarchal setting of Uttar Pradesh in north India; and (3) the more egalitarian setting of Tamil Nadu, in the south of India. We conducted surveys in all three sites in 1993–94. This study examines the situation of women in five socio-cultural settings and groups, distinguished by region and religion (north: Uttar Pradesh Muslims and Hindus and Punjab Muslims; and south: Tamil Nadu Hindus and Muslims).

The three sites have distinct socioeconomic features. Punjab is the most populous province of Pakistan with 52 percent of the population. The state is primarily agricultural with the exception of a few large cities—Lahore, Faisalabad, and Gujranwala—in which industrial activities are concentrated. Social conditions are quite advanced in Punjab relative to other provinces. For example, literacy rates (population aged 10 and older) in Punjab were 51 percent among males and 25 percent among females, compared to 47

and 21 percent, respectively, in rural Pakistan as a whole. Also, considerable internal and external migration in Punjab has rendered the state open to wider outside influences than either rural Sind or Baluchistan. Infant mortality at 92 per thousand live births, under-five mortality at 115 per thousand, and a total fertility rate of 5.3 remain high (Hakim, Cleland, and ul Hassan Bhatti 1999).

Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu lie at two extremes of the social and cultural spectrum in India, although economically they are similar. Both states are poor, with about 37 percent in Uttar Pradesh and 40 percent in Tamil Nadu living below the poverty line (compared to 33 percent in India), and both states are largely agricultural (Uttar Pradesh 72 percent, Tamil Nadu 61 percent, India 70 percent). Yet social development levels differ greatly. Literacy rates (population aged six and older) are much higher in Tamil Nadu (63 percent) than in Uttar Pradesh (42 percent), and fertility and mortality are much lower—for example, the infant mortality rate is 98 per thousand live births in Uttar Pradesh compared to 58 in Tamil Nadu; the under-five mortality rate is 141 in Uttar Pradesh and 87 in Tamil Nadu; and the total fertility rate is 5.1 in Uttar Pradesh compared to 2.2 in Tamil Nadu. Muslims experience higher total fertility rates than Hindus in Uttar Pradesh (5.3 and 4.8 respectively), but identical rates in Tamil Nadu (2.5 each) (Population Research Centre, Gandhigram Institute of Rural Health and Family Welfare Trust, and International Institute for Population Sciences 1994; Population Research Centre, Lucknow University, and International Institute for Population Sciences 1994).

The few available measures of gender disparities emphasize these regional differences in women's situation and vulnerability. For example, life expectancy at birth in Uttar Pradesh is about five years higher for males than for females (54 and 49, respectively); in Tamil Nadu, life expectancy for both females and males is 61 years. Moreover, the maternal mortality ratio is 931 per 100,000 births in Uttar Pradesh and 319 in Tamil Nadu. And gender disparities in literacy rates are far wider in Uttar Pradesh (25 percent for females compared to 56 percent for males) than in Tamil Nadu (51 percent for females compared to 74 percent for males).

Both states of India and Punjab in Pakistan are typically patriarchal and patrilocal, and the region as a whole is well known for inegalitarian gender relations. But beyond these broad generalizations, social systems and the ways in which kinship norms affect women's lives vary widely. In India, for example, there is considerable ethnographic evidence of regional differences in the situation of women, and female powerlessness is much more acute in north India than in south India (Karve 1965; Altekar 1962). Women in the north have relatively little autonomy or freedom of movement, limited inheritance rights in practice, and limited opportunities for control over economic resources. After marriage, a young woman is ex-

pected to remain largely invisible to outsiders and under the authority of her husband's family. She has little say in domestic decisions and little freedom of movement. About the only means available to enhance her prestige and even security in her husband's home is through her fertility, and particularly the number of sons she bears. The situation in Punjab is similar and well documented (Sathar and Kazi 2000). In contrast, women in south India have more autonomy in all of these respects: they have greater decisionmaking authority, are less secluded and more likely to work outside the home and control resources, and are less likely to perceive sons as their only source of prestige.

In terms of marriage patterns, all three settings are characterized by arranged marriages, patrilocal residence, and large dowries. The one big difference relates to support from the natal family after marriage. In north India, and particularly among Hindus, young girls marry into distant villages and into families with whom previous contact has been limited and subsequent contacts are usually infrequent; this practice is expected to heighten women's powerlessness. Women are perceived traditionally as temporary members in their natal homes (Dube 1988), who take resources from their natal families in the form of large dowries; even after marriage, the pattern and flow of resources is strictly one way (Das Gupta 1987). By contrast, in south India as well as Punjab, kin marriage and close natal family ties ensure that women are not cut off from family support to the same extent as they are in north India. A further distinguishing feature in Punjab, Pakistan, is the greater prevalence of exchange marriages between families. Marriages involving the exchange of female siblings reduce dowry requirements but can increase tensions between families: in cases where one couple experiences discord, the other suffers almost necessarily.

Less can be said about Hindu-Muslim differences. It has been argued that Islam restricts women's freedom to a greater extent than other religions. In India, for example, the general impression is that Muslim women are more likely than Hindu women to be denied work opportunities outside the home, a secular education, control over economic resources, recourse in case of abandonment or divorce, and choice in reproductive behavior. However, Muslim marriage patterns, at least in north India, and particularly in Pakistan, are less alienating from natal kin than those among Hindus (see, for example, Mandelbaum 1986).

The hypothesis that women exposed to the social system of the southern regions of the subcontinent have greater autonomy than women from the northern regions must be interpreted keeping in mind that autonomy levels in the subcontinent remain among the lowest in the world. Hence while women in Tamil Nadu are expected to have more autonomy than their northern counterparts in Uttar Pradesh, their autonomy is far more limited than that of women in other parts of Asia (Malaysia, the Philip-

piners, and Thailand, for example), and certainly more limited than that of men in the same settings (Mason et al. 1995).

Data

The datasets employed in this study are among the first seeking to operationalize autonomy among women from different cultural and religious settings. The main objective is to assess the relationship between women's autonomy and their reproductive behavior. Similar studies have been conducted in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand (Mason et al. 1995).

In Pakistan, Punjab was purposively selected. It is the most developed province in the country in terms of agricultural productivity, road structure, sanitation, communications, and availability of health and educational facilities. Yet it is by no means homogeneous: the province houses three distinct agro-economic zones, with central and south Punjab quite different from north Punjab not only in level of development and agricultural patterns (rainfed versus irrigated agriculture) but also in terms of feudalism and consequent female autonomy (rainfed rural areas and the periurban areas are less feudalistic than the irrigated areas). In order to represent this diversity, ten communities were selected from the three agro-economic zones. Nine of these were rural and one was periurban. The ten communities are: (1) northern rainfed (barani) districts (Rawalpindi, Attock, and Chakwal) and northern semi-irrigated districts (Mianwali and Khushab); (2) central (Faisalabad and Sahiwal) and south Punjab irrigated districts (Multan and Bahawalpur); and (3) a periurban area in central Punjab (Gujranwala district).¹

In India, Uttar Pradesh in the north and Tamil Nadu in the south were also selected to represent a range of gender-related and socio-cultural conditions. Within each state, two districts were selected (on the basis of an index of development, constructed from such indicators as income, percent of roads surfaced, and other economic criteria) so as to maximize differences in socioeconomic conditions, while at the same time allowing for comparisons of Hindu and Muslim women. And from each district, one taluka (subdistrict) was selected similarly. The four sites thus selected included: from Tamil Nadu, Pollachi taluka from Coimbatore district (ranked 1 of 21) and Mudukulathur taluka from Ramnathpuram district (ranked 18 of 21); and from Uttar Pradesh, Kunda taluka from Meerut district (ranked 2 of 63) and Baghpat taluka from Pratapgarh district (ranked 51 of 63).²

From each of the four sites in India, a cluster of contiguous villages of roughly 1,000–2,000 households was randomly selected, and about 800 currently married women aged 15–39 were randomly selected for interview. Husbands who were present were also interviewed. In each setting, on the assumption that socio-cultural norms governing female autonomy vary

widely between Hindus and Muslims, half of all respondents were selected to be Hindu and the other half were selected to be Muslim. As a result, a total of eight communities are covered: four geographical sites and, within each site, two distinct religious groups, Hindus and Muslims. In one setting, Mudukulathur, in which many husbands migrate out for work and would not be available for interview, a larger Muslim sample was selected to allow for the inclusion of the required number of husbands; however, to prevent Mudukulathur Muslims from dominating the findings for all Tamilian Muslims or the average for all women from Tamil Nadu, means for these two groups are weighted to adjust for this disparity. A total of 1,842 women, aged 15–39, constituted the sample.

In Punjab, currently married women were selected from ten communities ranging in size from 2,500 to 5,000 households. In the ten villages selected, all households were listed and about 100 households were sampled randomly to interview one currently married woman in each. About half the husbands were successfully interviewed. Unlike the Indian sample almost all women in Punjab were Muslims; 1,036 currently married women aged 15–39 were interviewed along with 436 husbands.

In the course of interviews with women, respondents were asked not only about their education and their work status but also about a variety of dimensions of female autonomy, including their decisionmaking authority, their personal freedom of movement, control over economic resources, and wife–husband power relations.

For ease of analysis, we collapse the 18 communities under study into five. For India, findings are presented separately for Hindus and Muslims in each state. In Pakistan, data from the ten communities are combined into a single figure. Of course, pooling data risks obscuring important influences of patriarchy, religion, and other conditioning factors. In other articles using these data, within-region levels of female autonomy have been explored and findings are largely consistent with those reported below (see, for example, Jejeebhoy 2000, 2001; Kazi and Sathar 2001; Mason et al. 1995).

Table 1 summarizes economic characteristics of households in the five communities. Economic status appears to be similar across sites as measured by per capita income. Land ownership status is closely linked with income levels, with landlessness being most pronounced in Tamil Nadu and among Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, followed by Punjab and Hindus in Uttar Pradesh; it is, however, the Hindus of both Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, and women in Punjab who report large, that is, six or more acres of landholdings. Finally, Punjabi women are more likely than other groups to live in pucca homes (made with high-quality materials, including the roof, walls, and floor) and to have electricity and indoor toilets; they also own more consumer goods.

Economic status can also be assessed by a profile of husband's education and occupation. School attendance levels are highest among the north

TABLE 1 Household characteristics in the study sample, by site

	Punjab	Uttar Pradesh		Tamil Nadu	
		Muslim	Hindu	Muslim ^a	Hindu
Land ownership					
Percent landless	53.9	66.3	25.8	71.9	64.2
Percent owning 6+ acres	11.1	3.4	14.1	2.5	12.8
Per capita annual income (\$)	89	71	101	68	89
Housing: Percent pucca	72.1	55.3	55.7	51.3	34.9
Household amenities					
Percent with electricity	81.3	35.3	29.8	64.7	41.8
Percent with indoor toilet	20.0	16.9	12.1	11.6	10.0
Consumer durables					
No. consumer goods owned ^b	3.6	1.5	2.3	2.2	1.9
Number	1,036	421	438	547	436

^aWeighted to adjust for larger sample size of Ramnathpuram Muslims.

^bOf the following nine: any transport (car/tractor/motorcycle), clock, fan, radio, refrigerator, sewing machine, stereo, TV, iron.

Indian Hindus followed by Tamilian Muslims and are lowest among north Indian and Punjabi Muslims. On average, however, husbands' educational levels are similar in India and Pakistan, suggesting that educational attainment levels of men are sensitive neither to region nor to religion. The occupational profile of husbands, by contrast, suggests clear differences by religion in the Indian sites: Hindus are, by and large, more likely to be engaged in agriculture than are Indian Muslims, both as cultivators and, to a lesser extent, laborers. Conversely, Indian Muslims are more likely to be engaged in nonagricultural activities: as salesworkers (mostly petty), skilled workers, and unskilled laborers. In Punjab most of the population in rural areas is engaged in agriculture and a substantial proportion is engaged in wage work also.

The situation of women

The most commonly used measures of women's status are their educational and economic activity levels. Evidence that disparities are wider when the two geographic regions are compared than when either country or religion is considered emerges from the data on women's educational status in Table 2. Large proportions of women in all five communities have never been to school, and few have completed primary school; note that these data refer to women's attainment of a secular education only. Considerably larger proportions of women in Tamil Nadu have attended school than have women in either Uttar Pradesh (India) or Punjab (Pakistan). Patterns by religious

TABLE 2 Levels and patterns of educational attainment in the study sample, by site

	Punjab	Uttar Pradesh		Tamil Nadu	
		Muslim	Hindu	Muslim ^a	Hindu
Women with some education (%)	19.6	19.5	38.8	71.5	53.9
1–6 years	14.7	15.4	16.9	55.7	36.5
7+ years	4.9	4.0	21.9	15.9	17.4
Mean number of years of schooling					
All women	1.1	1.0	2.9	3.6	3.0
Women with some education	5.5	5.3	7.3	5.0	5.7
Husband's educational status (%)					
Some education	60.8	57.2	82.0	88.0	69.1
1–8 years	34.7	34.9	24.4	74.1	49.8
9+ years	26.2	22.3	57.5	13.8	19.3
Mean number of years of schooling of husbands					
All husbands	4.8	4.4	8.2	5.4	4.6
Husbands with some education	8.0	7.7	10.0	6.1	6.7
Gender disparity in education between wives and husbands (%)					
Husband (5+ years better educated)	45.2	39.7	55.9	25.0	23.2
Husband (1–4 years better educated)	11.1	11.9	20.8	35.2	28.2
Wife better educated	4.4	3.3	3.0	23.3	19.3
Wife and husband same education	39.2	45.1	20.3	16.6	29.4
Worked for wages in last 12 months (% of women)	36.1	18.0	13.2	21.4	56.4

^aWeighted to adjust for larger sample size of Ramnathpuram Muslims.

group are less consistent: while it may be tempting to draw the inference, from the findings of Table 2 with regard to women from Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, that Muslim women are more likely to be denied education than are Hindu women, a comparison with Tamilian women questions this assumption. For example, 54 percent of Tamilian Hindus compared to 72 percent of Tamilian Muslims have attended school; in the north in contrast, school attendance rates are as low as 20 percent in Punjab and among Muslims of Uttar Pradesh, and 39 percent among UP Hindus. While the typical Tamilian woman, both Hindu and Muslim, had three or more years of schooling, women from other communities have typically attended school for lesser durations: just under three years among Hindu women from Uttar Pradesh, and about one year among Muslim women from both Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. In short, while it is apparent that among northern respondents, Hindu women—and men—are considerably better educated than Muslim women, the evidence from south India weakens the argument that Islam denies women an education.

Gender disparities in educational attainment levels (Table 2) are pronounced in all settings, but once again the north–south comparison yields the widest disparities. Among over 40 percent of women in both the north Indian and Pakistani communities, educational attainment of husbands exceeds that of wives by five years or more, and the gender disparity in education is widest among Hindus from Uttar Pradesh. In comparison, among south Indian women, irrespective of religion, this proportion is about 25 percent. Interestingly, about 20 percent of south Indian women are better educated than their husbands by about one to four years, compared to a negligible 3–4 percent in Pakistan and north India.

Although women are universally involved in unpaid household work, economic independence is usually measured in terms of wage-earning economic activity. In India and Pakistan, however, where wage work for women is often unacceptable and poverty-induced, working for wages is not necessarily an indicator of autonomy. Wage-earning women are not likely to have made the decision to work on their own, nor do they always have control over their earnings. Nevertheless, even in situations of dire need, families in cultures in which women are secluded may be reluctant to allow women to work for wages outside the family farm or business. Work histories suggest that in the 12 months preceding the survey, well over half of all women were engaged in some form of work other than unpaid household work—either wage-earning activities or unpaid labor on the family farm or plantation, in the family business, or tending family livestock. Regional profiles suggest that working women in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh are largely occupied in tending animals and working on family farms; in Tamil Nadu, in contrast, agricultural labor occupies the majority of working women, followed by working on the family farm in the case of Muslims and at skilled and unskilled nonagricultural work among Hindus. Yet, comparatively few women worked for wages, and here it is largely the Tamilian Hindus who stand out compared to the others (Table 2): 56 percent of them were engaged in wage work.

Many authors have suggested other measures of women's status. Prominent among them is delayed age at marriage: women who delay marriage are observed to be more independent and have more autonomy and self-confidence than those who marry at earlier ages. Additional measures include spousal age difference (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar 1979), joint family residence, and village endogamy.

Data shown in Table 3 bear out the finding that few South Asian women have a say in their choice of husband or the timing of their marriages. However, Tamilian women are considerably more likely than women from Uttar Pradesh or Punjab to have had a say in choosing their husbands.

Although the large majority of women from all five communities resided with their in-laws after marriage, current residential patterns tell a different story. In India, women in Uttar Pradesh, both Muslim and Hindu,

TABLE 3 Family variables in the study sample, by site

	Punjab	Uttar Pradesh		Tamil Nadu	
		Muslim	Hindu	Muslim ^a	Hindu
Marital age (women aged 20–39)					
Percent married at 16 or younger	37.1	55.1	48.4	32.3	21.5
Mean age at marriage (years)	18.0	16.4	16.6	17.4	18.3
Woman had a say in marriage decision (%)	16.1	12.8	9.8	31.7	42.0
Dowry amount (in US\$)	865	488	700	938	769
Living in natal village (village of birth or childhood) (%)	49.4	16.6	5.7	45.9	34.2
Current living arrangement					
Living with mother-in-law (%)	57.0 ^b	40.1	58.9	31.9	24.5
Residence after marriage					
Coresided with in-laws (%)	89.6	87.2	93.6	69.3	75.7
Age difference between spouses					
Mean age difference (years)	5.9	5.4	4.7	6.6	6.0
Percent distribution of couples					
Wife older	6.0	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.2
Same age or husband 1–4 years older	38.2	43.7	47.7	32.8	38.5
Husband 5–9 years older	35.3	48.0	49.1	51.9	47.9
Husband 10+ years older	12.6	8.3	3.0	15.1	13.3

NOTE: US\$1=Rs 51.2 (Pakistan) and Rs. 43.3 (India).

^aWeighted to adjust for larger sample size of Ramnathpuram Muslims.

^bPercent in non-nuclear households.

are more likely than women in Tamil Nadu to currently reside with their mother-in-law. In Punjab 57 percent of respondents currently reside in a non-nuclear household. South Indian women are also significantly less likely to report difficulties in their relationships with their mothers-in-law than are Punjabi women or those from Uttar Pradesh (not shown in tabular form).

In some instances, however, the situation of Punjabi women resembles that of south Indian rather than of north Indian women. Marital age (Table 3) varies markedly among the five communities, with southern women—particularly Hindus—reporting higher ages at marriage, and women from Uttar Pradesh reporting the lowest. In Uttar Pradesh, over half of all respondents aged 20 and older are married by age 16. In contrast, about one-quarter of Tamilian women and over a third of Punjabi women are married by age 16.

Finally, village endogamy (Table 3) is considerably more likely to be practiced among Tamilian and Punjabi women than among women from Uttar Pradesh. Although Muslims in both Indian settings are more likely

than Hindus to live in their natal villages, it appears that north Indian Muslims, like north Indian Hindus, marry their daughters into distant households; they are considerably less likely to reside in their natal homes than are Muslim women from Tamil Nadu or Punjab.

The importance of dowry in securing a woman's place in her husband's home is increasingly apparent in India, both through the alarming numbers of dowry harassment and death cases reported in the media, and through studies that suggest that women whose dowries are large are less likely to have suffered domestic violence than other women (Rao and Bloch 1993). Available in our dataset is information obtained from the respondent on the size and contents of her dowry: in jewelry and gold, cash, and a variety of other property including expensive consumer goods (vehicle, refrigerator, stereo, utensils) and (rarely) land. Approximate rupee values have been imputed for each of the items in the dowry, and the total value of the dowry in rupees has been assessed. Clearly, this is an approximation, since women—particularly those from Uttar Pradesh—appear not to have been fully aware of the extent of their dowry. Results suggest that the size of the dowry is generally large in all contexts, but that Punjabi and Tamilian women report substantially higher dowries (equivalent to about US\$865 and \$854 respectively) than those from Uttar Pradesh (\$594). Again, in this respect, the situation of Punjabi women resembles that of south Indian rather than north Indian women.

For the most part, however, a comparison of the conventional measures of the status of women reported in Tables 2 and 3 confirms that differences are more likely to reflect social systems as marked by region than by nationality or religion. South Indian women appear to enjoy greater levels of autonomy than north Indian women. For the most part, the situation of Punjabi women resembles that of north Indian women—although in some respects they fall between north and south Indian women.

Measures of women's autonomy

The literature suggests several separate but interdependent components to autonomy. These include the autonomy conferred by knowledge or exposure to the outside world; decisionmaking authority, or the extent to which women have a say in family decisions and decisions concerning their own lives and well-being; physical autonomy in interacting with the outside world, or the extent to which women are free of constraints on their physical mobility; emotional autonomy, or the extent to which women enjoy close bonds with spouses and are free from the threat of violence and abuse; and economic and social autonomy and self-reliance, namely the extent to which women have access to and control over their own and their household's economic resources (see, for example, Mason 1984; Caldwell

1979; Caldwell, Reddy, and Caldwell 1982; Jejeebhoy 1995). To assess these components of female autonomy, women in this survey were asked a battery of questions concerning their status within the household. From these responses, four dimensions of autonomy were selected and indexes were created for each: (1) economic decisionmaking; (2) mobility; (3) freedom from threat from husband; and (4) access to and control over economic resources. These and similar measures have been used elsewhere by the authors and others (see, for example, Jejeebhoy 2000, 2001; Mason et al. 1995; Kishor 2000).

Economic decisionmaking authority is represented by information on the participation of women in three economic decisions, selected to capture a range of decisions, from the routine to the out of the ordinary, and also to capture the extent to which women simply participate in the decision or actually perceive themselves to have a major say in it. Items include: the purchase of food, major household goods, and jewelry. The index sums the number of these three purchases in which the woman participates, assigning a score of 1 if she only participates in the decision and 2 if she also has the major say. The index thus ranges from 0 to 6.³

The mobility index sums the number of five places—the health center, the village community center or market, home of a relative or friend, a fair, and the next village—to which the woman can go unescorted. Again, the intent was to select a range of places, both within and outside the village, both easy and more difficult to access. Hence for example, while a community center or market and friend's home were always within the village, the health center and fairs were usually outside the village. The index ranges from 0 if the woman must be escorted everywhere to 5 if she can move about unescorted to each of the five places.

The index of freedom from threat ranges from 0 to 3: 0 is assigned if the woman both fears her husband and is beaten by him; 1 if she is beaten but does not fear her husband; 2 if she fears him but is not beaten; and 3 if she neither fears nor suffers beating at the hands of her husband.⁴ Here, the intention was to capture the continuum of power relations between spouses. In focus group discussions participants agreed that women who experienced a nonphysical rebuke from their husbands were indeed more likely to assert themselves than those who feared physical reprisals, and the index was constructed to reflect this.

The index of access to and control over economic resources covers two aspects of women's use of family and own resources: their freedom to use or manage household resources and the extent to which they have independent control over any resource. The index thus sums responses to seven questions. Four of these relate to access to household resources: (1) having a say in how household income is spent; (2) getting cash to spend; (3) being free to purchase small items of jewelry; and (4) being free to purchase

gifts. Three relate to aspects of women's expression of independent control over resources: (1) whether any of the family's valuables (land/jewelry/utensils) belong to the woman (that is, are in the woman's name) and are controlled by her; (2) whether she has or had some say or the major say (assigned a value of 0.5 and 1.0 respectively) in how the valuables from her dowry are used or spent; and (3) whether she expects to support herself in old age through her own savings. The index ranges from 0 to 7.

In focus group discussions it became clear that women were acutely aware of these and other aspects of autonomy. They discussed, for example, the extent to which young women's freedom was curbed by social norms and the watchful eyes of the men and elders in the family. They pointed out that older or educated women exerted more say in their own lives than did the uneducated; they discussed the ways in which women who coresided with their parents-in-law were watched with regard to their behavior and movements. And in responding to the survey questionnaire, women were clearly able to outline the limits of their decisionmaking power.

Table 4 presents mean values for each of the four measures, as well as the distributions of the variables constituting each measure. Results confirm the limited autonomy of women in all spheres, but suggest strong regional differences. Women from both northern sites—Uttar Pradesh and Punjab—fall significantly below women from Tamil Nadu in almost every measure of autonomy, a finding that strongly supports the argument that the north-south cultural divide described earlier powerfully conditions the extent of women's autonomy. In contrast, there is far less support for the commonly held assumption that Muslim women have less autonomy than Hindu women.

Women in general have limited economic decisionmaking authority: large numbers are excluded from even the most routine decisions, and few have the major say in any decision. There is a definite pattern to the kinds of decisions in which women participate: they are far more likely to be involved in decisions that are perceived as routine in the family economy, such as those relating to food purchases, than in decisions that involve major purchases. South Indian women exhibit far more decisionmaking authority than Punjabi or north Indian women. In contrast, there is no evidence of differences in decisionmaking authority among Hindus and Muslims.

Focus group discussions reiterate regional disparities in decisionmaking authority.⁵ Women in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh are far more likely than Tamilian women to recognize and justify their exclusion from household decisions:

The husband is responsible; after him come the father-in-law and mother-in-law and then come the brothers of the husband. (Muslim, central Punjab)

TABLE 4 Indexes of women's autonomy in the study sample, by site (percent of respondents)

	Punjab	Uttar Pradesh		Tamil Nadu	
		Muslim	Hindu	Muslim ^a	Hindu
Mobility: can go unescorted to					
Friend's home	57.4	35.1	34.1	77.6	90.3
Market or community center in village	35.4	34.8	34.7	81.7	94.7
Health center	27.8	38.4	43.0	59.1	76.4
Fair	7.9	16.8	19.3	20.9	41.8
Neighboring village	11.5	20.2	22.0	15.0	33.5
<i>Index</i> (maximum value = 5)	1.40	1.36	1.47	2.00	2.88
Economic decisionmaking					
Participates in decisions					
Food	71.2	17.8	18.3	84.4	89.0
Jewelry	31.1	35.3	32.2	49.9	56.9
Major goods	16.5	8.7	12.1	43.6	49.0
Is main decisionmaker					
Food	51.1	5.7	4.8	69.6	72.4
Jewelry	6.9	5.2	4.5	9.3	11.1
Major goods	4.6	1.4	0.9	9.5	11.8
<i>Index</i> (maximum value = 6)	1.82	0.74	0.73	2.67	2.90
Access to and control over economic resources					
Has a say in household spending	59.0	80.1	75.0	88.9	93.5
Gets money to spend	70.4	77.6	72.1	90.9	94.7
Is free to purchase small jewelry	16.1	32.3	29.1	24.3	28.0
Is free to purchase gifts for relatives	23.7	13.5	14.5	19.0	17.8
Owens and controls household valuables	61.0	15.5	16.0	26.1	22.6
Plans to use own savings for future support	29.9	26.3	28.5	43.9	43.8
Has some say in disbursal of dowry	33.6	16.6	24.2	27.7	29.2
Has major say in disbursal of dowry	28.9	23.8	18.0	61.0	62.2
<i>Index</i> (maximum value = 7)	3.06	2.60	2.50	3.66	3.71
Freedom from threat					
Has been beaten by and fears husband	32.0	35.8	38.1	15.7	18.6
Has been beaten by husband	34.5	41.6	47.8	35.8	38.6
Fears husband	82.0	58.6	59.1	35.6	36.8
Neither beaten by nor fears husband	14.9	35.7	26.3	44.3	43.3
<i>Index</i> (maximum value = 3)	1.49	1.58	1.45	1.93	1.86

^aWeighted to adjust for larger sample size of Ramnathpuram Muslims.

In our village, the woman does not have any value, so most of the decisions are taken by men only. (Brahmin, Pratapgarh district, Uttar Pradesh)

We do not have any right to make decisions. The one who is uneducated, what decision could she take? She could only fight and quarrel. So it is right that the man alone takes decisions. (Jat, Meerut district, Uttar Pradesh)

Tamilian women, in contrast, are more involved in decisionmaking and are also more likely to believe that they are entitled to this authority:

Decisions should be taken jointly. A good decision can be made only when taken together—three-quarters of the time, decisions are taken by men and one-quarter of the time, they are taken by women and men together. (Scheduled caste, Ramnathpuram district, Tamil Nadu)

It is we who look after them [children] at home; they [husbands] go out to work, they don't have the time to look after children, therefore it is the mother who should take decisions. (Gounder caste, Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu)

We [women] know more about the difficulties [of childrearing], we have the ability to think and see, men don't see, so we should take the decision regarding children, thinking that tomorrow our children should not be like us, they should be more than us. (Gounder caste, Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu)

That women have limited mobility is evident. First, of the five places included in the index, the average woman can visit fewer than two places unescorted. Second, as expected, there is greater freedom to visit nearby or relatively friendly places such as the village market or community center, the health center, or the home of a relative or friend in the village than other more remote places, such as a fair or an adjoining village. Third, results point strongly to the north-south contrast: of the five places included in the index, the average Tamilian woman can visit 2.4 unescorted, whereas the average respondent from Uttar Pradesh and Punjab can visit only 1.4 places without an escort. And finally, among north Indian respondents, Hindu and Muslim women's freedom is about equally constrained, whereas Tamilian Hindus have moderately greater mobility than Tamilian Muslims.

Women's access to and control over resources is also limited. While the majority of women have a say in how household income is spent and get cash to spend, few feel free to make small purchases of jewelry or gifts on their own. Regional variation persists: Tamilian women are more likely to have a say in the disbursement of household income and to get cash to spend compared to women from the other sites (about 90 percent compared to about 75 percent in Uttar Pradesh and 70 percent in Punjab). South Indian women are, however, as unlikely as women from other sites to feel free to spend the household's resources on themselves without permission from their husbands or mothers-in-law.

With regard to ownership and control over household valuables and own dowry, some interesting disparities emerge. In the two Indian settings, the majority of Tamilian women, compared to one-quarter of women from Uttar Pradesh, report owning land or household valuables "in their own name" (not shown here). Tamilian women, however, are considerably more likely than women from Uttar Pradesh to report also that these are owned jointly with their husbands and hence that they would not be able to control the disbursal of these assets without the consent of their husbands. In contrast, Tamilian women, whose dowries are predominantly in the form of gold and jewelry, are considerably more likely to report owning and controlling their dowries than are women from Uttar Pradesh (whose dowries are more likely to consist of household goods). The situation in Punjab is different. Punjabi women in our sample come from higher-income households, and over three-fifths of them report owning and controlling household valuables, some of which come from their dowries, as in the case of women from Uttar Pradesh. As a result of these different patterns, profiles of control over resources also vary. Punjabi women appear more likely to own and control valuables than women from Uttar Pradesh or Tamil Nadu. Yet it is Tamilian women who report greater control over their dowries. And when asked about plans for supporting themselves in the future, it is once more Tamilian women who are most likely to report expectation of self-reliance. Despite these differences in patterns of control, the index of access to and control over resources suggests again that Tamilian women are better off than women from Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. Average scores range from 2.5–2.6 (of a possible 7.0) in Uttar Pradesh to 3.1 in Punjab and to 3.7 in Tamil Nadu.

In comparison to the regional disparities recorded for decisionmaking, freedom of movement, and access to and control over economic resources, regional variation in women's freedom from threat is muted. The index of freedom from threat suggests that south Indian women are slightly freer from threat than are northern women from Uttar Pradesh or Punjab.

Focus group discussions underscore the extent to which women in both settings accept these unequal power relations, and accept beating as the husband's prerogative (see Jejeebhoy 1998; Jejeebhoy and Cook 1997). The general impression is that women who are disobedient or who "misbehave" deserve to be beaten.

A woman is beaten if she does not wash her husband's clothes, does not cook food or quarrels with the husband's mother and sister or argues with the husband. If the work is done properly the husband does not beat her. (Muslim, barani region, Punjab)

If she has committed a sin she should be beaten, although many women are beaten without any reason. (Muslim, central Punjab)

Beating is for the woman's own good. If she does something wrong, loses something, or hits children in anger, the husband must show her [by beating]. (Brahmin, Pratapgarh district, Uttar Pradesh)

If it is a great mistake, then the husband is justified in beating his wife. Why not? A cow will not be obedient without beatings. (Muslim, Ramnathpuram district, Tamil Nadu)

Even so, Tamilian women argue for greater understanding and less force:

The husband should not beat his wife. He should advise her. It is better to advise than to beat. (Muslim, Ramnathpuram district)

Men should not beat their wives. But being born as females, we should listen to what our husbands say. (Scheduled caste, Ramnathpuram district)

In summary, women in Tamil Nadu have significantly more decision-making authority, mobility, and access to and control over resources than women from Uttar Pradesh and Punjab and somewhat more balanced power relations with their husbands. A comparison between women in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, however, suggests greater similarities: while Punjabi women have more decisionmaking authority and access to and control over resources than women from Uttar Pradesh (irrespective of religion), indexes of mobility and freedom from threat are virtually identical for the two samples. Such findings offer strong support for the argument that region rather than religion has the stronger influence on women's autonomy in South Asia.

Dimensions and determinants of women's autonomy

In patriarchal contexts, tight controls are exerted on women in every sphere of their lives: their free movement, their voice in family affairs, their economic independence, and their relations with their husbands. In the absence of direct data relating to women's autonomy, previous studies have relied on a number of available indicators—years of education, work force participation, marital age, and spousal age difference in particular—as proxies for autonomy. On a policy level, moreover, it is often assumed that enhancing women's educational attainment and economic activity status and raising their marital age can directly increase their autonomy and the extent to which they have a say in matters concerning their own lives. Our dataset allows us to assess the effect of these proxies on the various dimensions of women's autonomy. We have constructed a summary index of autonomy. This index sums values in the four indexes discussed above and

shown in Table 4. Values on each index are standardized to vary between 0 and one; the summary index then combines each of these four values and thus ranges from 0 to 4.

Table 5 presents the results of regression analyses (OLS), which regress the summary index of autonomy on three sets of factors assumed to measure autonomy. The first set includes indicators usually assumed to measure women's autonomy, that is, education and wage-work status. The second includes other factors that may affect women's status in the gender-stratified settings of South Asia: age, parity, residence pattern, and size of dowry (in equivalent US dollars). The third is household economic status (as measured by the number of consumer goods owned). For Indian data, moreover, community-level factors (district, religion, state) are included among the explanatory variables. Results are presented for all women in Punjab (Pakistan) and separately for women from Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

The most striking result of Table 5 is the different pattern of correlates affecting dimensions of autonomy in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, on the one hand, and Tamil Nadu on the other. Also notable within each setting is that the summary index of autonomy appears to be explained by a different set of determinants. And third, socio-cultural context does indeed appear to condition the relationship of several correlates with autonomy, as evident from our study sample.

Determinants of the summary index of autonomy highlight the different patterns in the three sites. In Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, traditional measures of autonomy are far more powerful determinants of this index than they are in Tamil Nadu. In both Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, significant de-

TABLE 5 Correlates of the summary index of women's autonomy in the study sample: OLS regression coefficients, by site

	Punjab	Uttar Pradesh	Tamil Nadu
Attended primary school	0.07	0.10	0.17**
Attended secondary school	0.31**	0.19*	0.35**
Wage work in last 12 months	0.02	0.29**	0.08†
Age	0.02**	0.02**	0.03**
Number of surviving sons	0.01	0.04*	-0.02
Number of surviving daughters	-0.03†	0.02	-0.02
Resides with mother-in-law/extended family	-0.30**	-0.17**	-0.06
Size of dowry (\$)	0.0002**	0.0002**	0.0001
Number of goods owned	0.04**	0.05**	0.02*
District (ref.=less developed)		-0.03	0.04
Religion (ref.=Muslim)		-0.10*	0.19**
Constant	0.89**	0.57**	1.04**
Adjusted R-squared	0.13	0.17	0.12

ref. = reference category. ** p<=.01 * p<=.05 † p<=.10

terminants of this summary index include coresidence with mother-in-law, size of dowry, and age; additionally in Uttar Pradesh, autonomy is linked positively to the number of sons a woman has, and in Punjab it is related negatively to the number of daughters she has. In Tamil Nadu, by contrast, the only traditional factor to play a significant role is age.

Education and wage-work status are also significant determinants of the autonomy index, but their influence is generally stronger in Tamil Nadu than in the two northern sites. While in Tamil Nadu even a primary education significantly influences this index, in the other two sites it is not until a secondary education is attained that autonomy is significantly enhanced. And while wage-work status influences autonomy in all three settings, its influence is most significant in Uttar Pradesh. Finally, economic status is uniformly associated with autonomy in each site.

There is considerable regional variation in the determinants of other autonomy indicators (data not presented). Within each site, however, a relatively common set of socio-cultural factors is important in defining at least three indicators of autonomy, namely, decisionmaking authority, mobility, and access to and control over resources. These socio-cultural factors are economic activity, age, coresidence with mother-in-law, and size of dowry in Uttar Pradesh; family structure, age, and less consistently secondary education and wage work status in Punjab; and education, work status, age, and, to a lesser extent, coresidence with mother-in-law in Tamil Nadu.⁶

Our results therefore suggest that traditional factors conferring authority on women—age, marital duration, number of surviving sons, nuclear family residence, and dowry—have a more powerful effect on women's autonomy in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, the settings with wider gender disparities, than in Tamil Nadu, where gender relations are more egalitarian. In contrast, in Tamil Nadu, education (even a primary education) plays a prominent role in enhancing almost every dimension of autonomy; wage work has a positive but less consistent effect. In Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, while both education and especially wage-work status enhance aspects of autonomy, their effect is less consistent.

Influences of region and religion on women's autonomy

The findings discussed above suggest that socio-cultural and regional context makes a difference in shaping factors that determine women's autonomy in South Asia. Our dataset enables us to discern, moreover, the extent to which such contextual factors as region, religion, and nationality play a role in determining the four selected components and the combined index of female autonomy in the subcontinent. In Table 6, data from the three sites are pooled, and the regression analysis performed in Table 5 is repeated. The aim is to focus directly on the three contextual factors.

TABLE 6 The influence of cultural, national, and geographic context on indicators of women's autonomy in the study sample, OLS regression coefficients^a

All women by religion, country, and region	Decision-making (0-6)	Mobility (0-5)	Freedom from threat (0-3)	Access to and control over resources (0-7)	Summary index of autonomy (0-4)
Religion					
Muslim	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Hindu	0.125*	0.45**	-0.14*	-0.12 [†]	0.05
Country					
Punjab, Pakistan	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, India	-1.11**	-0.01	0.17*	0.10	0.14 [†]
Region					
Northern subcontinent (Punjab and Uttar Pradesh)	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.	ref.
Southern subcontinent (Tamil Nadu)	1.79**	0.63**	0.34**	0.80**	0.65**
Adjusted R-squared	0.36	0.18	0.07	0.18	0.30

ref. = reference category. ** p<=.01 * p<=.05 † p<=.10

^aControlling education, economic activity status, age (also as a proxy for marital duration), parity, coresidence with mother-in-law, dowry, economic status.

First, our findings suggest that religion plays a modest role in influencing female autonomy in our study sample. We have already seen in Table 5 that the hypothesis that Muslim women experience greater constraints on their autonomy than Hindu women is not borne out. In Tamil Nadu, for example, Hindu women do indeed experience more autonomy than Muslim women in such areas as decisionmaking and mobility. In Uttar Pradesh, by contrast, Hindu and Muslim women are equally constrained in terms of decisionmaking and mobility, and Muslim women are significantly freer from threat and experience greater access to and control over resources than Hindu women.

With the inclusion of Muslim women from Pakistan in Table 6, findings clearly suggest that differences between Indian and Pakistani women can be attributed neither to nationality nor to religion. Rather, after controlling for the effect of a host of socio-cultural factors, every indicator of autonomy remains strongly conditioned by region within the subcontinent, with Tamilian women (representing women from the south) experiencing significantly greater autonomy than women from either Uttar Pradesh or Punjab (jointly representing women from the north). There is greater distinction in women's autonomy by a broad north-south residence than by religious ascription.

Findings clearly reiterate the modest and inconsistent influences of religion and nationality in shaping female autonomy in the region. For ex-

ample, as far as religion is concerned, Hindu women have about as much autonomy (as measured by the summary index) as Muslim women do, particularly in the areas of access to and control over resources; Hindu women, however, have significantly more decisionmaking authority and mobility, and significantly less freedom from threat. Nationality, similarly, has an inconsistent influence: after controlling for region and religion and other socio-cultural factors, Indian women appear to have less decisionmaking power than do Pakistani women, greater freedom from threat, and about as much mobility and access to and control over resources.

In contrast, region plays a strong and consistent role in shaping female autonomy. No matter which indicator of autonomy is considered, women residing in the southern part of the subcontinent consistently display significantly higher levels of autonomy than do women residing in the north. Moreover, the influence of social system, as measured by region, in almost every case is far stronger than that of religion or nationality.

Conclusions and discussion

Our findings, based on a sample from Pakistan's Punjab Province and from two Indian states, indicate that women's autonomy—in terms of decisionmaking, mobility, freedom from threatening relations with husband, and access to and control over economic resources—is highly constrained in Pakistan and in north and south India. Findings suggest that South Asian women are largely excluded from family decisionmaking; they have limited access to, and exercise limited control over resources; their freedom of movement is severely constrained; and few are free from threat and violence at the hands of their husbands.

Our findings also confirm considerable variation in the levels and determinants of women's autonomy in this region. The evidence suggests that in the more gender-stratified settings of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, autonomy is largely the result of factors that traditionally confer status, notably family structure or absence of controls implicit in coresidence with mother-in-law and size of dowry, along with economic activity (in Uttar Pradesh) and a secondary education (in Punjab). In contrast, in the more egalitarian setting of Tamil Nadu, education and to a lesser extent economic activity are powerful determinants of almost every indicator of autonomy. Traditional forces such as coresidence with mother-in-law and dowry continue to affect several measures of autonomy, but these effects are generally modest. The implication, in short, is that in the highly stratified settings of rural Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, autonomy continues to be shaped largely by traditional factors. Although secondary education in Punjab and economic activity in Uttar Pradesh tend to enhance autonomy also, their effects are less consistent, so that they may be relatively poor proxies for autonomy. In Tamil Nadu, by contrast, education and to a lesser extent economic activity

tend to raise almost every indicator of autonomy, and the use of education in particular as a proxy for women's autonomy is more justified. These findings suggest that the cultural context—operationalized here by region—influences the factors associated with autonomy, and they argue for context-specific measures of women's autonomy.

Our findings demonstrate the centrality of social institutions of gender within each community, as defined here by region of South Asia—rather than primacy of religion or nationality—in shaping women's autonomy. A clear regional divide, net of individual and household characteristics, is evident in almost every index of autonomy: decisionmaking authority, mobility, access to and control over economic resources, and, to a lesser extent, freedom from threat by husbands. Women in Tamil Nadu experience far greater autonomy than women in either Uttar Pradesh or Punjab. Also striking are the similarities in female autonomy in Uttar Pradesh in India and Punjab in Pakistan. Most convincing are findings from the pooled regression analysis, demonstrating the relative strength of the prevailing social system, as operationalized by region, in conditioning female autonomy levels in the subcontinent.

In comparison, the influences of religion and nationality are less consistent and powerful. There is little support for the argument that Muslim women are disadvantaged in terms of autonomy, at least when compared to Hindu women from the same region. For example, the pooled regression analysis provides further evidence that once region and nationality are controlled, the influence of religion is moderate and inconsistent. Also, a comparison of Hindu and Muslim women in the Indian sample, and a comparison of Indian and Pakistani women in the pooled sample suggest that, once region is controlled, levels of autonomy are not very different among Hindus and Muslims. In South India, however, there is moderate support for the argument that Hindu women have greater autonomy than Muslim women. In Uttar Pradesh, by contrast, Hindu-Muslim differences in every dimension of autonomy are insignificant. When women from all three sites are considered, Tamilian Muslims exhibit far greater levels of autonomy than do either Hindu or Muslim respondents from Uttar Pradesh and respondents from Punjab.

Some political and literary commentators have argued that religion remains an important part of the explanation of social conservatism in the subcontinent and that the greater conservatism in north India can be dated to the advent of Islam in the northern part of the subcontinent and the establishment of Muslim culture there. Furthermore, in contrast, the direct influence of Islam has been modest in the south and Hindu culture has dominated there. This view has been questioned by a number of scholars. For example, as Dyson and Moore (1983: 47) argued: "[W]e note the general view of scholars that both the essential features of the regional differ-

ences in kinship..., and their broad geographical distribution, are of very long standing. It is widely held that they mostly predate the Muslim presence, reflecting instead basic differences between northern 'Aryan' and southern 'Dravidian' culture areas." Our finding that, once region is controlled, differences in autonomy between Hindu and Muslim women are modest is consistent with this latter view.

Our findings also have implications for policy. In particular, the findings that education and employment do not necessarily enhance women's autonomy and that traditional factors conferring status on women remain strong suggest that strategies to enhance women's autonomy need to expand beyond education, employment, and delayed marriage. More comprehensive, direct, and context-specific strategies to increase women's autonomy must simultaneously be sought. These include raising women's gender consciousness, enabling women to mobilize and access community resources and public services, providing support for challenging traditional norms that underlie gender inequities, facilitating the acquisition of usable vocational and life skills, enhancing women's access to and control over economic resources, and enabling women to establish and realize their rights (see, for example, United Nations 1995; Batliwala 1994; Mahmud and Johnston 1994; World Health Organization and UNICEF 1994). These strategies are particularly important for the northern cultures of the subcontinent—whether Pakistani or north Indian, whether Hindu or Muslim.

Notes

This article was written with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, for a project entitled "Gender and reproductive health in India and Pakistan." The support of the Foundation is gratefully acknowledged. This is part of a larger study of five Asian countries (India, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand), with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (India) and the Rockefeller Foundation (Pakistan).

1 A profile of the ten communities in Punjab underscores their agro-ecological and socioeconomic differences. Corresponding differences are also observed in farming systems, employment, and land ownership patterns. In the northern rainfed (barani) regions, land ownership is broad based, with a large majority of households owning small parcels of land. Agriculture does not offer a reliable and adequate source of income, is constrained by the uncertainty of water supply, and is chiefly geared to subsistence production with the main

crops being wheat, maize, and millet. A large proportion of men are employed in nonagricultural occupations, particularly in the armed forces, and in formal-sector jobs including in the nearby urban center; subsistence agricultural production is managed largely by women.

The northern semi-irrigated villages are similar to the northern barani areas except that some cash crops are grown and land ownership is more concentrated. In contrast, in the canal-irrigated communities of central and southern Punjab, agriculture is market oriented and a lucrative source of income. It is also more feudal, with land concentrated among a small proportion of the population. Whereas central Punjab is characterized by a substantial number of medium-sized farms, southern Punjab contains large farmers and feudal lords. It is not unusual, in southern Punjab, for a family of large landlords to own the entire agricultural and residential area of certain villages. Correspondingly, households

in central Punjab have greater access to urban white-collar employment than do those in the south.

2 A profile of the eight communities in India also highlights considerable heterogeneity. In Uttar Pradesh, Pratapgarh district, in the east, is a poor, largely wheat-producing area, with few amenities; while theoretically available, health and educational facilities function only sporadically. Brahmins represent the dominant Hindu caste. In contrast, Meerut district is very well off: its main crop is sugarcane, although wheat, millet, and maize are also produced. Our sample sites lie in relatively close proximity to the main town, and less than 100 km from New Delhi. Amenities and services are largely available, as are a host of private health and educational facilities. Jats are the main Hindu caste.

In Tamil Nadu, Ramnathpuram district lies on the southeastern coast. Palmyra is the main crop, and occupations revolve around tending plantations, cutting down and marketing coconuts, and processing fiber. Villages tend to be poorly connected by roads, have severe water supply problems, and are often reduced to depending on rain and river water. School and health facilities exist in, or within walking distance of, most villages and, by and large, function regularly. In contrast, Coimbatore is one of the richest districts of Tamil Nadu: its main crops are cotton and groundnut. Transportation, communication, and other amenities are of good quality; piped water is available in many villages. The main Hindu castes of Ramnathpuram and Coimbatore are, respectively, Nadars and Gounders, both from the upper castes.

In each selected taluka, village lists were drawn up; these included information on the total number of households in each village by religion and caste. In order to adequately represent Muslims and scheduled caste households, contiguous villages were merged into sampling units of roughly 1,000–2,000 households, in a way that would allow for adequate representation of the different groups in our design. As a result, in Tamil Nadu, where there are generally few Muslims, clusters of villages were much larger than in Uttar Pradesh, where Muslims represent a substantial proportion of the population. The primary sampling unit (PSU) included in the sample was then selected randomly.

In Tamil Nadu, the selected PSU contained 12 villages from Pollachi (Coimbatore district) and 15 from Mudukulathur (Ramnathpuram district). The selected PSUs in Uttar Pradesh contained fewer villages: 7 from Kunda (Pratapgarh district) and two large villages (with many "petis," or identifiable clusters) in Baghpat (Meerut district). Each household in the selected cluster of villages was listed and this list constituted the sampling frame. The difference in the number of villages selected in each state is attributed to the following: (1) village sizes tend to be larger in Uttar Pradesh than in Tamil Nadu, and (2) since Muslims constitute less than 10 percent of the population of Tamil Nadu, a larger number of villages was required in order to reach our target composition of respondents.

3 A limitation of the index of decision-making authority is that the way it weights women's participation raises equivalence problems with certain scores where it could be suggested that having the major say in fewer decisions yields more autonomy than merely participating (but not having the major say) in many.

4 The decision to assign a value of 2 (lower autonomy) to women who fear but are not beaten by their husbands, and 1 to those who are beaten but do not fear their husbands (more autonomy) was made on the basis of focus group discussions: women spoke of fearing husbands as a way of showing respect to them and of endeavoring not to displease or disobey them. Beating was described, however, as a humiliating experience, in which husbands demonstrate their displeasure with the failings of their wives; and members of the community tend to see women who were beaten as having been disobedient.

5 The quotations from women that follow were translated from the original Urdu and Hindi by the research teams.

6 The remaining two indicators of autonomy (freedom from threat and control over resources) are defined by a somewhat different group of socio-cultural factors. A look at the determinants of freedom from threat suggests quite diverse inter-site patterns. In Uttar Pradesh, for example, larger family size appears to enhance freedom from threat; in Tamil Nadu and Punjab, by contrast, women with many children have more unequal relations with their husbands than low-

parity women. While education clearly enhances freedom from threat, its influence is most powerful, as expected, in Tamil Nadu. In Punjab, while wage-earning work is associated with greater violence, size of dowry appears to free women from

the threat of violence. Finally, and particularly in the two Indian sites, women from better-off households tend to report greater freedom from threat than other women.

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