

Women's empowerment in nine countries, using 'Work, Attitudes and Spending' surveys

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ABSTRACT

The 'Work, Attitudes and Spending' (WAS) household surveys interviewed thousands of households, in nine countries researched by WAS so far. This paper investigates women's empowerment, in each of these nine countries. It considers women's earnings, and explores the possibility that a woman's earnings may give her some power over her husband's behaviour. WAS respondents are adults of all ages (in WAS surveys, respondents are usually over 18 years old). This paper limits WAS survey data to households where the respondent is married or cohabiting (except for Table 1 below, which reports all WAS respondents).

INTRODUCTION

This document examines data on the nine countries covered so far by the 'Work, Attitudes and Spending' (WAS) series of surveys; see website www.was-survey.org for an overview. WAS survey data has been collected and processed by commercial market research firms, except for Indonesia and Egypt (in each case, the data was collected by universities: both had considerable experience of carrying out households surveys, prior to the WAS fieldwork). Each WAS survey is intended to give a representative picture of the country studied; note, however, that some WAS surveys only sampled households in urban areas. All tables and charts in this document have been produced by the author, based on raw data from WAS surveys. The WAS data can be downloaded, free, from the above website.

WAS surveys give a variety of information on the households interviewed; this paper includes some of the questions used in WAS surveys. The questionnaire varied between WAS surveys (see the above website for details); but a core of questions remains common, such as the list of education level for each household member. This paper emphasises questions included in most or all WAS surveys, in order to compare the different countries studied.

The primary focus of this paper is earnings of married women, compared to her husband's earnings. This paper explores the hypothesis that women who earn relatively high wages tend to be empowered (if all other factors are equal). However, no one measure of women's empowerment has yet been accepted by the academic community.

DATA AND METHODS

The effective sample sizes in WAS surveys to date are indicated in Table 1. Each WAS sample is intended to give a representative sample of that country's population, as far as is possible with the limited budget (& hence, limited sample-size). The main exception is Brazil: the 1994 survey only included two cities (Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo), and both are in the richer southern part of Brazil. Another problem is Indonesia: only four cities were sampled in 2001 (and re-sampled in 2002), and three of these four cities are on the main island of Java. Some, but not all, of the WAS surveys include a sample of rural households. This immediately suggests a problem: if we compare two countries in which one survey is urban only, whereas the other country sample has urban and rural households, then any apparent difference between the countries might be caused by urban/rural differences (rather than differences between the two countries). A further complication is that the surveys were carried out in different years; attitudes and behaviour vary

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over time, and this may give a misleading impression. In view of the complications discussed in this paragraph, readers should interpret patterns in this paper as tentative; they may merit further study, perhaps combining WAS survey data with evidence from other surveys such as the 'Demographic and Health Surveys'.

TABLE 1: sample sizes in WAS surveys.

year & country of survey	sample sizes:	
	urban	rural
1992 India	2654	
1994 Brazil	1031	
1997 India	1003	
2000 South Africa	2000	
2001 Indonesia	1003	
2002 India	1651	
2002 Indonesia	1000	
2003 Nigeria	2703	2345
2004 Kenya	3091	
2005 Nigeria	2671	2340
2005-6 Egypt	2122	2985
2007 India	2475	
2008 Chad	1938	649
2009 Cameroon	2100	1400
Total	27442	9719

In the above table 1, we see sample sizes vary between countries; but no country sample contains less than a thousand households. India has been researched most often by WAS surveys – so far, four times. In each table and chart below, all WAS surveys in the same country are combined and treated as one sample.

For this paper, one measure of women's empowerment is used as a reference: women's relative earnings. It is difficult to assess the extent to which a woman's earnings are sufficient to give her options – for example, could a woman afford to leave her husband, if he became violent to her? To answer such a question, we would want to know the costs faced by that household, such as food and rent – which may vary between countries, and within a country. This paper compares the wife's earnings with those of her husband, on the assumption that a woman generally has more choices if she earns a wage similar to that of her husband; whereas if a husband is the sole earner in a family, he may gain power over his wife (perhaps threatening to divorce her, if she does not obey him). Some WAS survey households are extended families (e.g. including grandparents); this paper only considers households if the respondent is married (or cohabiting), and where earnings data are available for both respondent and his/her spouse.



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RESULTS

This paper begins by reporting, for each country, the average fraction of husband-and-wife earnings which the wife earns. To interpret results in this paper, we could suppose there are 2 adults in each household, and that household members other than husband & wife (usually children) earn little or nothing. Research by the author (not reported in this paper) indicates that this assumption is unrealistic, but may be a helpful starting point. It would be possible to limit the WAS sample to (for example) households with 2 adults – however, this would greatly reduced the sample-size.

Table 2 reports the average wife's earnings, as a fraction of earnings of husband and wife; this could be used as a proxy for the fraction of household earnings which the wife earns. This fraction is only calculated where either husband or wife or both are in paid employment – households where neither spouse is employed are excluded from Table 2.

TABLE 2: wife's earnings, as fraction of husband + wife's earnings

Country	Average fraction of wife's earnings	Sample size
India	4.5 %	5018
Egypt	6.7 %	4463
Brazil	16.1 %	803
Indonesia	17.6 %	1466
Chad	21.1 %	1526
Cameroon	22.6 %	1096
Nigeria	29.7 %	4824
Kenya	34.2 %	2066
South Africa	36.5 %	1179

Table 2 shows dramatic differences between the nine countries studied. In Table 2, rows are arranged in ascending order of wife's relative earnings. The lowest fraction is India (top of Table 2), where the wife only earned (on average) about 4.5% of the combined earnings of herself & her husband. The other extreme is South Africa, where on average wives earn about 36.5% of (her own plus her husband's) earnings; if we take 36.5% as being about a third, this suggests the husband earns about twice as much as the wife on average.

The assumption of this paper is that if a wife earns a large fraction of the family's earnings, she is 'empowered': she has the chance to say "no" to her husband. For the remainder of this paper, countries are arranged in the order shown in Table 2. This is shown on the horizontal axis of charts in this paper. The first such graph is Chart 1, which reports arguments between husbands and wives. Note that due to missing data, only six of the nine countries surveyed by WAS are included in Chart 1 (arguments were not asked in early years of WAS surveys).



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CHART 1: arguments between husband and wife

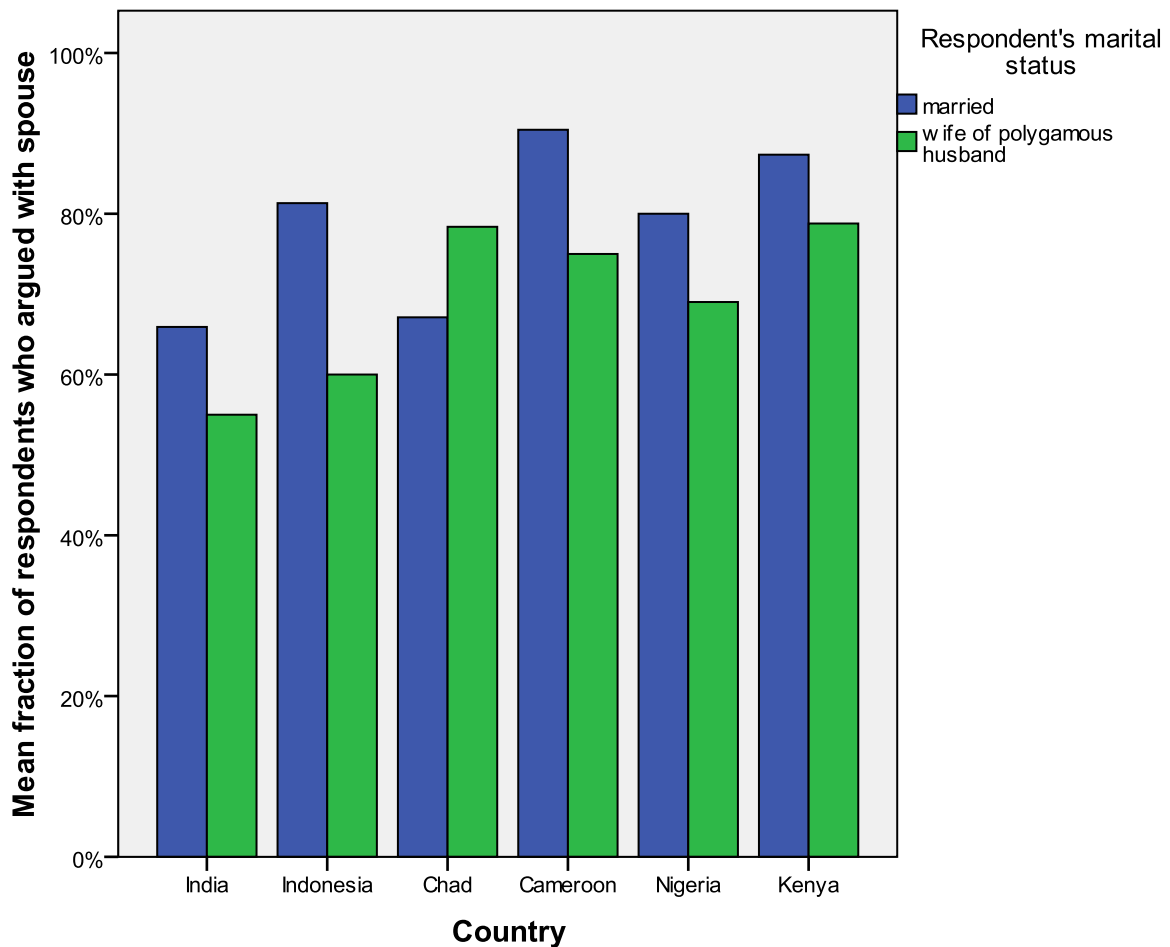


Chart 1 suggests a tendency for the risk of argument between spouses to increase, as we go from left to right (although this is far from being a straight-line relationship – presumably wife’s earnings are not the only relevant factor in the prevalence of arguments). It appears that in countries where women earn a relatively large fraction of household income (such as Kenya), there tends to be more domestic quarrels (than countries such as India, where women tend to earn less). This pattern may, at least partly, be a result of women who earn more feeling more able to question and challenge their husband’s household decision-making power.

There is a tendency for fewer arguments in polygamous marriages, in Chart 1; this tendency is shown in five of the six countries in Chart 1 (the exception being Chad, where polygamous marriages are more likely to have arguments than monogamous marriages). It is not clear why polygamy is relevant to the likelihood of spouses arguing.

Chart 2 suggests that in countries such as Kenya where women tend to earn a relatively large fraction of the family income, there is a risk of arguments; but arguments do not necessarily lead to violence. Indeed, it may be the opposite: a wife’s earnings may help protect her from violence by her husband. Simister (2009) suggests that a woman in South Africa is less likely to be a victim of domestic violence if she earns enough money to feed herself and her children; similar claims are made for Egypt, by Simister & Zaky (2009). Viewed in this light, feminists might



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interpret the increased prevalence of arguments on the right-hand-side of Chart 2 as being a positive sign – a higher-earning women may be better able to stand up to her husband, regarding family decisions.

CHART 2: wives' education levels

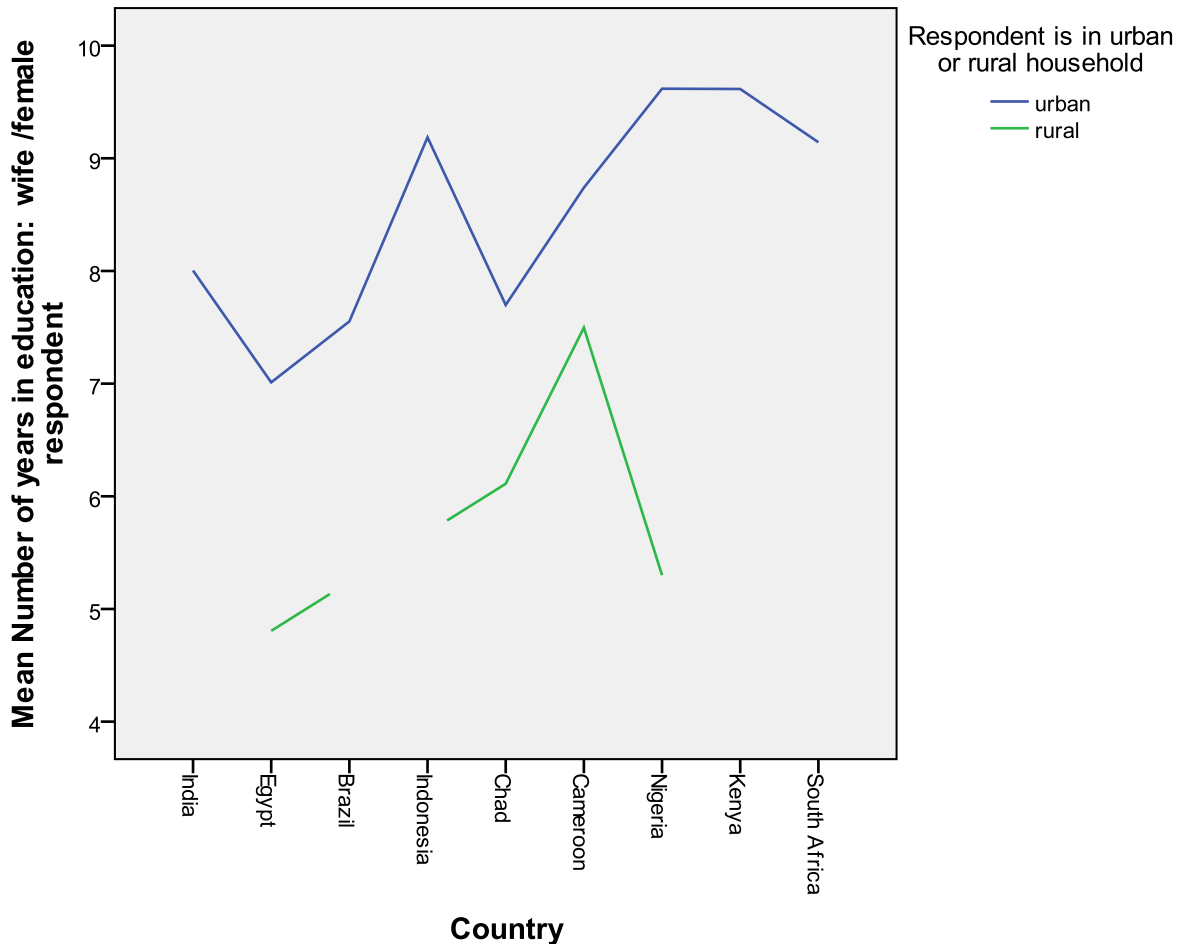


Chart 2 reports education levels of wives (female respondent, or wife of male respondent), in the nine different countries; Chart 2 is split into urban and rural households. Chart 2 indicates that in general, urban women tend to be more educated than rural women: the blue (urban) line is above the green (rural) line. Chart 2 also shows a tendency for education levels to rise, as we go from left to right. This may (at least partly) explain the differences between countries in Table 2: we would expect a woman to be able to earn more, if she is more educated (if all other variables were the same).

The next evidence investigated, in Chart 3, is unpaid housework. Chart 3 is included to allow us to assess if women who earn relatively well (compared to their husband) are able to renegotiate the domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry (childcare was excluded from the time-use data used to create Chart 3). For Chart 3, respondents are divided into male and female – because it is possible men may claim to do more (or less) housework than they actually do. There is a striking difference between men and women respondents in Nigeria (I am currently unable to explain why).



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CHART 3: unpaid work by husbands

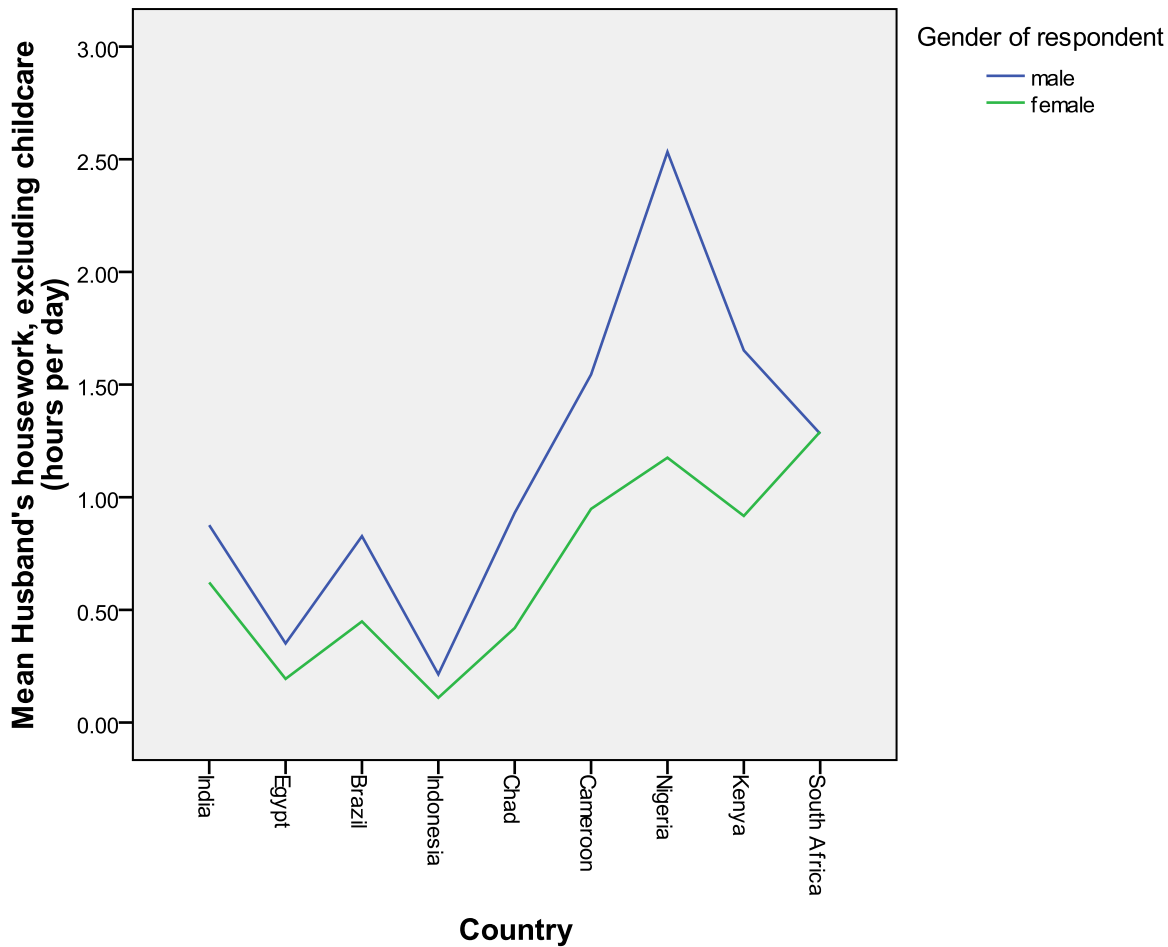


Chart 3 tells us that as we go from left (where wife earn much lower wages than their husband) to the right (where women earn relatively more), men tend to do more unpaid housework. Adding childcare to Chart 3 would not dramatically change the underlying pattern of an increasing trend from left to right, but does make the chart less clear because Brazilian men appear to spend a much larger time on childcare than men in the other countries surveyed by WAS (note that his may be due to the WAS sample in Brazil being from the south only – and hence probably atypical of Brazil as a whole).

CONCLUSIONS

Evidence reported in this paper is exploratory. It investigates women's autonomy in nine countries, using a variety of evidence. The Tables and Charts used here are arbitrary; there is no reason to assume that the variables examined in this paper are better or worse than other variables in WAS surveys, to measure women's well-being.

It would be possible to interpret the evidence in this paper in terms of women's earnings, and women's power. For example, we might begin by looking at Chart 2, and consider women's education as the driving force behind patterns in this paper; if so, we might interpret women's relative earnings (shown in Table 2) as a result of these educational differences between countries. We could then see men's domestic work (in Chart 3) as an effect of education,



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perhaps mediated by women's earnings. But this is an arbitrary interpretation – perhaps we should be looking at each country's culture, or religion, or childhood socialisation. In research such as this paper, it sometimes seems that everything affects everything else: for example, education can affect earning power, but also affect attitudes, and social class. There seems no obvious way to proceed – statistical methods such as regression cannot entirely solve these problems, because of collinearity (e.g. if more educated women tend to be fairly rich, then we cannot easily distinguish between effects of education and effects of income/wealth). Perhaps future researchers will be able to use WAS survey data to explain women's autonomy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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