

Women's Status, Marital Power Relations and Wife Beating in Egypt

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## Introduction

Violence against women is ubiquitous in all societies. One of the most common forms of violence against women is abuse by their husbands or other intimate male partners. Like elsewhere in the world, wife beating in Egypt is not uncommon. One out of three married women has been beaten by their husband at least once since marriage. Among women who have ever been beaten, 45 percent have been beaten at least once in the past year, and 17 percent were beaten three or more times during the year. Whether they themselves have been beaten or not, most married women agree that husbands are sometimes justified in beating their wives (EDHS-95).

Previous research in Western countries has supported both sociological and feminist perspectives on spousal violence and has shown a pattern of wife beating when spouse relative resources are incompatible and spousal power dynamics deviate from the traditional gender norms (Anderson 1997; McCloskey 1996; Yllo and Bogard 1988). However, the thesis of status incomparability is not supported by empirical studies in developing countries (Hoffman et al. 1994; Oropesa 1997; Hindin and Adair 2002). The non-existence of the relationship between spousal relative resources and wife beating in developing countries suggests that the western notion of resource incompatibility may not provide an adequate interpretation for wife beating in developing societies.

As wife beating is typically enmeshed in a complex web of asymmetric gender relations that make women vulnerable to it, recent studies in developing countries have embraced the feminist perspective and started to examine the relationship between women's empowerment and household decision-making and wife abuse (Koenig et al. 2003; Hindin and Adair 2002; Jejeebhoy and Cook 1997). In this paper, I use the 1995 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey

data to examine social factors associated with wife beating in Egypt. I am particularly interested in the possible links between women's status and patterns of household decision-making and wife beating. Given the increasing recognition of the importance of understanding women's status and intra-household decision-making characterizing spousal power dynamics in shaping women's risk of intimate violence, the exploration of their relationships in the context of Egypt is an important endeavor. In the following sections, I first review the literature on wife beating and provide a brief introduction of gender norms in Egypt. Then I will introduce the data and method. Finally I will explain empirical analyses results followed by a conclusion and discussion.

### Theories and Previous Research

The feminist perspective on family violence emphasizes that the overarching patriarchal dominance and the marital power asymmetry is the ultimate root of intimate violence against women (Dobash & Dobash 1979; Dobash et al. 1992; Yllo 1993). In a society with strong patriarchal tradition or continued existence of norms and social institutions that support the value of patriarchal ideology, husbands control their wives and use violence to maintain that control when necessary (Levinson 1989). Using domestic authority (usually referring to inequality in making decisions involving the use of family resources, the restriction of women, children and so on) as a predictor of wife beating, empirical studies demonstrate the traditional pattern of wife abuse. In a cross-cultural research in 90 traditional societies, Levinson (1989) found that wife beating occurs more frequently in societies in which men have the final say in domestic decision-making.

Recent research on intimate violence in developing countries has also noted that household decision-making can be an important factor associated with wife beating (Jejeebhoy & Cook 1997; Hindin & Adair 2002). Hindin and Adair's study indicates that deviations from the normative marital dynamic result in more incidence of intimate violence in the Philippines. The greater the decision-making power of men, the more likely they are to use violence against their wives; however, women are also more likely to experience violence when they dominate household decisions. A more egalitarian decision-making power between spouses reduces wife abuse. This is a useful framework for wife beating especially in a transitional society in which men's traditional power in the family has eroded while women's power has increased.

In previous research on the relationship between women's status and fertility behavior, women's education and employment serve as the most frequently used proxy measures of women's status (Mason 1984 & 1987; Gage 1995). Education and women's paid employment is considered to improve women's ability to resist subjugation and to acquire greater power in decision-making, and, consequently, more control over their reproductive decisions. However, researchers on family violence contend that a considerable uncertainty persists in the relationship between women's empowerment and wife beating. On the one hand, women who are better educated and who do paid work have more options, which allow them the means to get out of an abusive relationship. On the other hand, women's economic or educational empowerment may promote male insecurity or feelings of economic inadequacy, leading to more violence in relationships (Hindin & Adair 2002).

Empirical research provides evidence for the uncertainty in this relationship. The relationship between women's empowerment and wife beating can be negative, positive or non-existent. For example, Koenig et al. (2003) found increased education of women is associated

with lower risks of violence in Bangladesh. Case studies (Schuler 1996) in Bangladesh suggest that women who earn income from employment are more likely to be beaten than women who have no income and are completely dependent on their husbands. As women began to earn independent incomes and increase their mobility and autonomy conflicts often develop. In this case, women's economic empowerment increases their propensity to defend themselves against male domination. In contrast, evidence in the Philippines finds no relationship between women's paid work and their experience of intimate violence (Hindin & Adair 2002). Similarly, a study in Mexico also shows that women's economic empowerment is unrelated to wife abuse (Oropesa 1997). The inconsistent relationship between women's empowerment and wife beating in different social contexts suggests that this relationship is context-specific. This is clearly indicated in Koenig et al's (2003) studies with community level information. They found that in Bangladesh in the more culturally conservative area, higher individual-level women's autonomy is associated with higher risk of violence, and community-level variables are unrelated to violence. In the less culturally conservative area, in contrast, individual-level women's status indicators are unrelated to the risk of violence, and community-level measures of women's status are associated with lower risks of violence.

### The Egyptian context

Egypt provides an ideal setting for studying the issue of gender relations and wife beating. Egypt is an Islamic society in the midst of rapid industrialization and economic development (World Bank 1995). Despite its economic gains, the long history of patriarchal tradition remains dominant in Egypt. Women's overall status is low. The illiteracy rate for women is more than 30 percent as compared to less than 20 percent for men. Women comprise

only about 10 percent of the total labor force, and less than 20 percent of women are in the paid labor force. Women continue to marry at an early age, and the traditional marriage between blood relatives prevails (Kishor 2000).

In the Arab world, gender inequality is not only expressed as women's disadvantages in education and labor force participation, it also transcends cultural and religious boundaries. Within households, the husband is uniformly accepted as the ruler of the family and is regarded as the formal authority to whom the wife should obey. Thus the family roles follow a hierarchy where the conditions of lower status roles are delineated by the husband and are adhered to by the wife (Hay-Yahia 1998). Wife beating is socially accepted as part of a husband's discipline.

In the Egyptian family, the patriarchal domination is also reflected in men's domination of household decision-making and women's low autonomy (Nawar et al. 1994). Literature has shown that decisions about the household budget allocation and women's physical mobility are considered male's domains and are consistently dominated by husbands. However, women tend to seek joint decisions in the culturally defined "private spheres" such as childrearing, domestic management, and contraceptive use (Singerman & Hoodfar 1996; Govindasamy & Malhotra 1996). Spousal bargaining power within households varies with different socio-economic status. Better-educated working women in the nontraditional environment have more bargaining power in the household. But they tend not to make autonomous decisions. Rather, they seek to make joint decisions with husbands (Nawar et al. 1994).

Although there has been some relaxation of the double standard for gender roles over the past several decades, Egypt still adheres to rigid gender norms emphasizing the complementary roles of males as breadwinners and females as homemakers (Rugh 1984). The Islamic culture gives women the unconditional right to depend on their husbands for economic support. But in

the mean while, women assume unconditional responsibility for domestic work. Under the traditional division of household labor, Egyptian women's entry into or exit from the labor force depends to a large extent on the ability of men to earn sufficient income for the household. Lower class women are increasingly under the pressure to take up slack in incomes as the economic situation deteriorates. The double bind of low-income women's productive and reproductive roles becomes a source of family conflicts in a society that locates women's place within the home (Singerman & Hoodfar 1996).

### Hypotheses

The preceding discussion about feminist perspectives on intimate violence and about gender norms in Egypt leads me to the following assumptions about the relationship between household decision-making, women's empowerment and wife beating:

1. In couples where men/others dominate household decisions or wife makes decisions alone, women are expected to experience more violence due to unequal power relations in the household;
2. In couples where a couple makes joint decisions, women are less likely to be beaten as they have more bargaining power in the household;
3. Women who are empowered through education and paid employment are less likely to experience violence relative to women who are less empowered in these two aspects.

### Data, Sample and Method

The 1995 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS-95) data are well suited to conduct the analyses on wife beating. The EDHS-95 provides detailed information on household

and individual socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. It also includes a module on women's status, which collected information on the incidence of wife beating, the intra-household decision-making, and post-marriage residential arrangements. The EDHS-95 is a nationally representative survey of 14,779 ever-married women aged 15-49. The women's status information was sought only from about half of these women (7,121). This research is restricted to a sub-sample of 6,341 currently married women who stayed together with their husbands. Given the purpose of the examination of intimate violence, I also exclude women who reported being beaten more often by someone else than their husband.

#### *Dependent variable*

The women's status module contains two questions concerning the incidence of wife beating: (1) From the time you were married has anyone ever beaten you? (2) How many times were you beaten in the past one year? Since the exposure to the risk of spousal violence varies over women's life course, I will use the frequency of beating in the past year as the measure of wife beating. I recode it into a dichotomous measure: whether wife has been beaten within the past year or not.

#### *Independent variables*

The EDHS-95 asked eight questions about household decision-making: whether husband, wife, couple or someone else has the final say in the household on visits to friends and family, household budget, having another child, children's education, children's marriage plans, medical attention for children, use of family planning methods, or food cooked at home? I choose household decision-making on budget and wife's mobility as the major predictors of spousal



power relations. Because these two aspects of decision-making are consistently dominated by men and are more likely to be the contested terrain of spousal power relations within household. I code decision-making on household budget and women's physical mobility into three dichotomous variables: husbands or other family members dominate decisions, wife make decisions alone, and couple make decisions jointly.

The second set of predicting variables measures women's autonomy. Women's autonomy is measured by educational levels and employment status. Literature shows that these two proxy measures are useful indicators of women's autonomy in Egypt (Nawar et al. 1994; Kishor 1995; Govindasamy & Malhotra 1996). In Islamic Egypt where women do not work outside home unless needed, employment status may not be a good measure of women's economic security. Evidence shows that Egyptian women with paid work have few children and achieved better outcomes for children's health (Kishor 2000). Women's employment status is categorized into three dichotomous variables (paid work, unpaid work and currently not working). Women's educational level is recoded into four dichotomous variables (no education, primary, secondary and tertiary education).

#### *Control variables*

Previous literature indicates that traditional marriage is associated with women's lower status in Egypt (Rugh 1984; Kishor 1995). I include two dichotomous variables (married to blood relative and currently co-resident with husband's family) to control for the effect of marriage pattern and post-marital living arrangements. I also expect women's age and numbers of young children have effects on women's position at home and on their dependence on marriage as it is shown in other traditional societies (Schuler et al. 1996; Rao 1997). The EDHS-

95 includes a household wealth index based on thirteen consumer durables as a proxy for household economic resources. Variables for region/area of residence are controlled for the effect of urbanization and industrialization<sup>1</sup>.

### *Model and method*

To examine factors associated with wife beating in Egypt, I use logistic regression models because the dependent variable is a two-level categorical variable. I estimate five logistics regression models predicting wife beating. The five models are nested, meaning that each subsequent model adds to a set of independent variables in the preceding model. The nested modeling approach allows for the assessment of changes in the magnitude and significance of the coefficients associated with the addition of each variable or each set of variables. In the following section, first I describe the characteristics of the sample, and then I report results from multiple logistic regressions.

## Results

### *Descriptive results*

Descriptive statistics for women's experience of violence are displayed in Table 1. About 17 percent of the 6,341 married women in the sample report that they have experienced physical abuse by their husbands over the past year. It appears that women in higher educational groups experience less intimate violence than women in lower educational groups. About 10 percent of women who have secondary education and 2.5 percent of women who have tertiary

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<sup>1</sup> Egypt is divided into 26 governorates grouped together as the Urban Governorates, Frontier Governorates, and the governorates of Upper and Lower Egypt. The Frontier Governorates account for only 1 percent of the population, which is more rural than urban. The Urban Governorates are entirely urban. The Upper Egypt Governorates lag behind other regions in terms of most socioeconomic and demographic indicators (Kishor 2000).

education have been beaten, while the corresponding figures for women who have no education or primary education are 20.7 percent and 18.9 percent respectively. Bettered educated men are less likely to physically abuse their wives. Women with a paid job and women who are currently not working are less likely to experience physical abuse compared to women with a unpaid job. Over 30 percent of women with a unpaid job have been beaten while less than 8 percent of women who do paid work have experienced abuse. Among couples that decision-making on budget and women's physical mobility are dominated by husbands or others, women have a higher incidence of being abused relative to those that decisions are made jointly by the couple or by the wife only.

- Table 1 about here -

#### *Multivariate analysis of factors associated with wife beating*

To examine the predictors for wife beating, I conduct a series of logistic regression. Table 2 presents the results of five logit models for women who experienced intimate violence relative to those who have not. Model 1 looks at the effects of socio-demographic variables. Model 2 and model 3 examine the effects of women's education and employment, and model 4 and model 5 tests the effects of household decision-making. As the effects of the variables remains essentially unchanged throughout the four models with additional variables, I focus the discussion on model 4 and model 5. I only report odds ratios for ease of interpretation.

- Table 2 about here -

My hypothesis about the relationship between household decision-making and wife beating is partially supported. Husbands or other co-resident family members' domination of household decision-making are strongly associated with wife beating. In model 4 of Table 2, net of other effects women are 1.42 times more likely to experience intimate violence when household financial decisions are dominated by the husband or other family members compared to decisions made jointly by the couple. Similarly, in model 5, after controlling for the effects of all other variables, women are 1.55 times more likely to be beaten by husbands when decisions on women's physical mobility are controlled by husbands or other family members. In contrast, when decisions are made by the wife, the likelihood of physical abuse is not significantly different from the situation that the couple makes joint decisions. The strong effects of husbands'/others' domination of decisions on budget and women's mobility may suggest that when husbands control household decisions they have more power than the wife in the household and this power can be expressed in the form of physical violence against women probably more often when spousal conflicts arise and when husbands practice their right of disciplining their women. The evidence reflects a traditional pattern of male domination in Egyptian households. However, there is a caveat here. With the cross-section data, we cannot determine the causal order between decision-making and wife beating. In such case, it may also be possible that husbands/others' domination of decisions is the results of physical abuse against women. Therefore, we can only say that husbands and other family members' domination of household decisions are associated with wife beating.

The hypothesis about women's empowerment and wife beating is also partially supported. As expected, better-educated women are less likely to experience intimate violence. In model 4 and model 5, women who have secondary education are about 30 percent less likely

to be beaten than those who do not have education at all, and women who have tertiary education are about 70 percent less likely to experience physical abuse. Apparently, female education has an important empowering effect on women. Female education can increase women's ability to negotiate power relations within household possibly through gaining access to information from media or through exposure to modern settings or ideas in their work. Men's higher education is also a protective factor for intimate violence. Men who have tertiary education are more than 40 percent less likely abuse their wives. Unexpectedly, women's paid employment does not make any difference for their experience of intimate violence. In contrast, women who do unpaid work are 1.54 times more likely to experience spousal violence than women who do not work at all. The strong effect of unpaid employment may suggest that poor women's move into unpaid work outside home poses a tension between women's productive and reproductive roles. Unpaid work does not bring bargaining power to women, instead it creates a double bind of low-income women's productive and reproductive roles that may become a source of family conflicts in a society locating women's place within the home.

The effects of control variables are worth noting. In both model 4 and model 5, after controlling for other individual and household variables, rural and less developed regions show strong and consistent negative effects on wife beating. Women who live in less developed regions or areas are significantly less likely to experience intimate violence than those living in the most developed urban settings. The only region that does not differ from the urban Governorates in the incidence of wife beating is the urban Lower Egypt, which has a similar level of socio-economic development. The results indicate that as families move from a traditional society to a modern society, they may experience more economic insecurity or stress that probably arouse intense family conflicts. However, in the same setting, women who live in

low-income families experience more intimate violence. Older age of women and the traditional marriage pattern between blood relatives turns out to be protective factors for violence against women, while large number of young children slightly increases women's chance of being abused.

Looking at the explanatory power from model 1 through model 5, we find from the changes in log likelihood ratios that model 1 predicting the effect of socio-demographic characteristics provides the strongest explanatory power for wife beating. The addition of women's educational attainment in model 2, and the addition of household decision-making variables in model 4 and model 5 improve the model fit modestly. Adding women's employment variables in model 3 only changes model fit slightly. This suggests that wife beating in Egypt is mostly conditioned on social settings and household socio-economic status, while woman's education and household decision-making predictors do add explanations to the full picture of household power relations related to wife beating but not as substantially as they do in other societies.

### Conclusion and Discussion

Although wife beating in Egypt is rather pervasive and shares many features of the problem in other societies, it is still remains hidden and "covered under the veil". Till now, we do not know much about the issue of wife beating in Egypt. Using data from the EDHS-95, this paper approaches the issue of wife beating in Egypt from the angle of feminist perspective on intimate violence. I explore the effects of household decision-making and women's empowerment on their experience of intimate violence in a society where the level of women's

autonomy is low and household decisions on budget and women's physical mobility are mainly dominated by men.

The findings lend some support to the feminist approach of patriarchal control over women. Intra-household dynamics on decision-making and wife beating are related. Not surprisingly, when decisions on household budget and women's mobility are dominated by men or other family members, husbands are more likely to use force against wives as a means of control. When couples share an egalitarian decision-making, women experience less intimate violence. Probably due to the low level of women's decision-making role, women's control of decision-making is not related to their experience of intimate violence.

This paper also provides evidence to the effect of women's empowerment on wife beating. Women who have secondary and tertiary education experience less intimate abuse. This result suggests that female education is an important means to empower women not only in public sphere but also in private terrain. Education enables women to lead a life with economic security, which allows women to end an abusive relationship when needed. Better-educated and well-informed women can also have more bargaining power vis-à-vis men within the household.

Women's paid employment is not related to their experience of intimate abuse. However, unpaid work appears to be a disempowering factor for women in spousal relationship. Women who do unpaid work are more likely to experience intimate violence. This implies that these women experience more difficulties in coping with the gender norms than women who assume a traditional gender role in the context of Egypt. Unpaid work outside home reduced women's time for domestic responsibility thus posing a challenge to their traditional gender roles as homemakers. This acute conflict of women's inside and outside roles may be one source of

spousal conflicts and wife beating. It is also possible that their husbands' inability to support the family may bring about men's violence against women as a result of role inconsistency.

In general, wife beating in Egypt is closely related to structural factors. Socio-demographic factors are found to be strongly associated with wife beating. A higher level of household wealth can reduce the risk of wife beating. One important but unintended finding is that intimate violence in Egypt is also context-specific. Women who reside in more developed urban settings are exposed to higher risk of intimate violence than women who live in less developed urban settings or in rural areas. This result indicates that in a transitional society the changing gender norms have strong impact on family life. Men and women who are more affected by the socioeconomic transition have experienced more dramatic changes, conflicts or maladjustment in their private lives.

The lack of impact of women's paid employment and the strong effect of women's unpaid jobs on their experiences of intimate violence have policy implications for interventions that intend to combat domestic violence against women. Programs to deal with domestic violence against women sometimes consider women's empowerment, particularly women's labor force participation and women's education, as effective ways to help women get out of the abusive relationships. There is truth in it. But it is not always true. In some traditional cultural settings like in Egypt, women use their roles in the household and their kinship network to bargain power with men. In such circumstances, informal sector work or even modern sector jobs will not necessarily bring them more bargaining power in spousal relations. The weakening of kinship networks as a result of transition from a traditional to a modern society sometimes removes the social support that women can rely on. This is not to assume that women's labor force participation and education is not an important means for empowerment, and traditional



marriage pattern and traditional way of life are advantageous. One important implication of the study is that because women's empowerment is context-specific, intervention programs dealing with the intimate violence against women should try to design culturally sensitive programs by combining the goals of individual women's empowerment and changing gender norms.

The study has several methodological limitations. With the cross-sectional data, the relationship between household decision-making and wife abuse needs to be interpreted with caution. Wife beating can be both the cause and the consequence of men's domination of household decisions. Until we have longitudinal information, the causal ordering will not be easily determined. The other limitation lies in data quality. The measures of wife beating rely on women's self-reported data. For a sensitive issue of intimate abuse, a common problem is that women may under-report violence when asked by an anonymous interviewer in a structured manner (Schuler et al. 1996). In fact, it is likely to be the case in Egypt where women tend to share the private issue of intimate abuse only with family members (EDHS-95). Further research and data collection on marital relationship and intimate violence should address these issues.

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