

DRAFT

**TWO NOTIONS OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: SOME LEADS FROM
DHS DATA ON WOMEN'S STATUS AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**

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In a seminal paper in 1981, Dyson and Moore introduced the concept of 'female autonomy' to explain regional differences in demographic behavior in India. That paper and that concept inspired such an excited response in the literature that a Popline search on 'autonomy' today produces over a thousand hits. A related follow-up word, 'empowerment', gets even more hits. These are astounding numbers and attest to the ideological and empirical appeal of the idea that as women begin to have a greater say in affairs, that is, as they become more 'autonomous', their families prosper demographically because birth and death rates in their households fall.

Dyson and Moore's paper and one that followed closely on its heels (Mason, 1984) also triggered numerous attempts to 'define' female autonomy in terms of freedoms to do various kinds of things. In turn, this led to attempts to empirically 'measure' female autonomy, initially at more local levels (see, for example, Basu, 1992, referring to data collection in 1985-86). Indeed, the emphasis on measurement issues soon overwhelmed any interest on what the word itself meant (for a rare exception, see Jeffery and Basu, 1996, and the papers within), serendipity contributing to the effort to do this as much as any very credible logical arguments. Using a Third World (and especially

South Asian) cultural context, much of the literature zeroed in on physical mobility, and control of decision making within and outside the home as meaningful indicators of female autonomy. These indicators were useful because a few simple questions on this in small and large surveys were able to get a measure of female autonomy. They were also self-justifying because they were indeed shown in these empirical surveys to have an association with lower fertility and lower infant and child mortality, often at the community level (see, for example, Basu, 1992; Mason and Smith, 2000) and then even at the individual level (see, for example, the references in Jejeebhoy, 1998).

All this has been very useful for demographic and gender policy, but has tended to beg the question of semantics. Trying to unpack the findings in this literature in new ways might help us understand better what it means for a woman in the Third World today to be 'autonomous' or 'empowered'. In the present paper, we try to examine some of the implications of this 'autonomy' for women themselves. We do not question the finding that these survey measures of autonomy are correlated with strong positive effects on family welfare. What we do is ask if these measures of autonomy might have different implications for families and for women themselves. Indeed, we use these different field-survey measures of autonomy to explore the question of whether there can be two kinds of empowerment, with somewhat different underlying capacities and freedoms involved.