

The Quality of Family Relationships and Women's Agency in India

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Abstract: Existing research on the determinants of women's agency neglects the quality of family relationships. Kinship patterns, family structure, and domestic violence have been addressed, but broader family relationship quality, including especially positive aspects like love and support, has not been adequately addressed. The quality of family relationships may be an important determinant of women's agency. Using data from the Women's Reproductive Histories Survey, I find that women with higher quality family relationships do have greater agency. Specifically, women in nuclear families score higher on an agency index when they see their natal families more often and have closer relationships with their husbands. Similarly, women in joint families who have closer relationships with their husband and fewer difficulties with their in-laws have greater agency. Further, the size of these effects are often just as large, if not larger, than more commonly discussed sources of agency, such as education and age. This paper also uses qualitative data from Darjeeling District to explore the mechanisms that link family relationship quality and women's agency.

I. Introduction

Women's empowerment has received a great deal of attention as both a means and an end of international development. Education, micro-credit, and land rights have all been promoted as ways to help women become the beneficiaries of development. At the same time, these policies and programs are seen as ways to help women become more powerful agents of development. Empowered women are better able to secure the well-being of themselves and their families. While the importance of women's empowerment to development is increasingly accepted, the complexities of the links among empowerment and its determinants and consequences are still not well understood.

One element that has not been adequately addressed is the quality of family relationships. By quality, I refer to the range of companionate aspects of relationships, including love, affection, and support. Love and support found in high quality family relationships may be an important source of women's empowerment. Higher quality relationships may create an environment where women are both more willing to assert themselves and those above the woman in the traditional family hierarchy are more willing to take her choices into account. In such a context, husbands, mother-in-laws, or other senior family members, may be better acquainted and concerned with her wishes and take young women's preferences more seriously. Further, family members wanting to maintain a loving or at least amicable relationship may be a powerful incentive for them to give women greater scope to make decisions. The quality of family relationships with those residing outside the household may also affect women's empowerment within the marital household. For instance, particularly close relationships with parents or brothers may ensure that women receive education, inheritances, and other resources, which in turn promote women's empowerment. Thus, this paper addresses the questions of whether high quality family relationships are a source of women's empowerment. It also explores the mechanisms linking family relationship quality in the marital household and women's empowerment to

better understand how such empowerment may take place. In the interests of brevity, a discussion of the mechanisms linking relationship quality with natal family members is not included.

Before going any farther, it is important to first make a brief statement about terminology. There are several terms for what is often the same, but blurry concept of women's empowerment. As given by Kabeer (2001a) and reinforced in an influential review by Malhotra and Schuler (2005), empowerment is defined as an increase in women's ability to make choices about their lives and environment. This definition focuses on women's agency – women's ability to exercise power by making choices – while also specifying that empowerment is a process of change where women gain agency over time. When using cross-sectional data, the term women's autonomy is often used to refer to the same concept of agency found in women's empowerment without the element of change over time (Jejeebhoy 2000; Malhotra and Schuler 2005). Some critique the use of the term autonomy because the accompanying emphasis on acting alone discounts the interdependence of family life and women's own preferences to make choices with others (Kabeer 2001b; White 1992). Thus, from now on I use the term women's agency defined as women's ability to make choices. I use agency to signal a focus on women's ability to make choices without necessarily including an emphasis on change over time or women acting alone.

II. Existing Research on Family Relationships and Agency

A Neglected Determinant of Women's Agency

The quality of family relationships is a factor that is largely missing from work that aims to identify the determinants of women's agency. In some cases, family relationships in general are simply ignored, as seen in much of the research on intrahousehold allocation in economics. The early unitary model of household bargaining assumed that a household has a single utility function, implying that the

household is functionally equivalent to an individual (Becker 1965). More recent, collective models open up the black box of the household and contend that individual's preferences within a household can and do vary (Haddad 1997). However, these models still base an individual's bargaining or decision-making power largely, if not entirely, on an individual's ability to be economically independent (Haddad 1997; Quisumbing and de la Briere 2000). Thus, bargaining power is usually measured as individual income and ownership of assets. Some newer models now include social norms, bargaining skills, and contextual factors, such as divorce laws in their models as additional determinants of bargaining power (Agarwal 1997; McElroy and Horney 1981; Quisumbing 2003). However, to my knowledge, none of these models take into account how the emotional content of family relationships may shape who makes household decisions and what decisions are made.¹

Existing research does recognize the importance of family relationships in terms of how they vary by kinship patterns. Some anthropologists and sociologists have explored how kinship structures affect women's status and agency (Dyson and Moore 1983; Dube 1997; Deshmukh-Ranadive 2005). For instance, Dyson and Moore's (1983) classic article contends that differences in women's agency between North and South India is largely determined by kinship structure. In the North, they suggest that exogamous marriage patterns and cooperation among men related by blood only lead to low

¹ A handful of economic studies do look at domestic violence as part of the bargaining process (Bloch and Rao 2002). Domestic violence, as an aspect of relationship quality, is addressed below. Even while focusing on domestic violence though, in the tradition of rational choice Bloch and Rao assume that a husband's satisfaction with his marriage is based entirely on the amount of dowry obtained and number of live sons. They frame domestic violence as a bargaining tool, not an aspect of marital satisfaction. Thus, even while focusing on domestic violence they do not take emotional aspects of marital quality into account.

female agency. Conversely, preferred endogamy and cooperation between men related by blood and marriage lead to relatively high female agency in the South.²

Much of the discussion of kinship and women's agency in South Asia has centered on patterns of family relations within the patrilineal joint family. The specifics of kinship structures vary both within and across regions. It bears repeating that India, in particular, is incredibly diverse. However, there is analytical benefit from stylistically comparing broad family systems and their implications for behavior. As described by Das Gupta (1999), the joint family system can be characterized by a "corporate ethic" where the main purpose is to ensure the continuity of the patrilineal family line and the primary bonds are among those related by blood. As blood relations with important symbolic roles, daughters of the family are treated well, although not as well as sons since they do not carry on the family line. Daughters-in-law are brought in to the family to have children and do housework. The potential bond between husbands and wives is seen as a threat to the survival of the joint family unit. To control this potential threat, the relations between husbands and wives are supposed to be characterized by respect and avoidance. For example, Derne (1995) notes how some upper caste men in Varanasi did not speak with their wives in front of their parents in observance of this norm. Bennett (1983) sums up these kinship norms for women's status simply as "dangerous wives and sacred sisters." Within the joint family system, women acquire the most power as mothers-in-law. As mothers-in-law they have established their value and security by continuing the family line through having sons and have their own daughters-in-law to command.

² In revisiting Dyson and Moore's thesis, however, Rahman and Rao (2004) find that kinship patterns do not explain differences in women's agency between North and South India as Dyson and Moore suggest. Instead, they find that differences in kinship patterns between North and South India are quite small in the recent period and do not have significant effects on women's mobility or decision-making power. Thus, they conclude that kinship patterns do not explain differences in women's agency between North and South India.

Following the patterns within the joint family system, several studies of women's agency take women's position in the household hierarchy into account. Nearly all quantitative studies include women's age, which is a marker of woman's stage in the trajectory from new daughter-in-law to established mother-in-law. Several studies also include measures of household structure and/or women's place in that structure, such as whether she resides with a mother-in-law or in a nuclear household. These studies reinforce that women who reside with older in-laws have less agency than women who reside in nuclear households or are at the top of the generational hierarchy of a joint household (Bloom et al. 2001; Mason 1998; Mullany et al. 2005; Mumtaz and Salway 2005; Malhotra and Mather 1997; Allendorf 2007; Balk 1997; Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001).

In taking kinship patterns and family structure into account, these studies also distinguish between natal and marital family members. As noted above, women's relations with their natal family are structurally, culturally, and, quite possibly, biologically constrained to be more loving and supportive than relations with marital families. Ethnographic accounts of women's lives often describe the warm ties women share with their parents and siblings (Jeffery et al. 1989; White 1992; Bennett 1983). Thus, residence and contact with natal kin are viewed as potential sources of agency and some quantitative studies bear this out. In Sri Lanka, women who live with their own parents have more social and organizational domestic power, but not more financial power, than those who reside with in-laws or in nuclear households (Malhotra and Mather 1997). In Zimbabwe, women who live with parents or in-laws have less decision-making power than those who live in nuclear households (Hindin 2002).

In this vein, a handful of quantitative studies also take visits with natal kin into account. Bloom et al. (2001) find that women who have more contact with their natal kin are significantly more likely to have greater control over finances, greater decision-making power, and greater freedom of movement in Varanasi. Similarly, among Tamang communities in Nepal, Fricke et al. (1993) find a positive

association between women choosing their own spouse and the frequency of visits with natal kin in the first year of marriage. Further, the presumption that natal ties are strong and loving, led Jeffery et al. (1988) to propose measures of natal family contact as a measure of women's agency. Noting that women have the closest relationships with their mothers, they suggest that if given a choice, women would choose to see their mothers more often. Therefore, they conclude that living closer to their mothers and having visited their mother recently is a good way to assess whether women are exercising agency.

These studies that include variation in visiting natal relatives and residence with natal kin do get at some variation in relationship quality with natal family ties. However, the ethnographic and quantitative work that takes this variation into account is still analytically rooted in a kinship framework. Natal ties are unilaterally assumed to be high quality relationships for women and the only limitation is how often women are able to visit them. Frequency of contact with natal kin is not framed as an indication of the strength of relationship that women have with their natal kin. In other words, there is no recognition that women who visit their natal kin frequently may do so in part because they have especially strong relationships with their natal kin.³ More importantly, these studies do not take variation in marital family relationships into account, which are very likely more important to women's daily lives.

Peeks at Relationship Quality in the Literature on Women's Agency

Family relationship quality has not made it on the list of determinants of women's agency that includes education, employment, and micro-credit, among others. The closely related kinship and

³ Fricke et al. (1993) are an exception to this pattern. In their ethnographic work they do describe how respondents noted that long visits to natal families are a sign of particularly strong ties between a woman and her natal kin.

household structure have made it on the list, but still do not adequately address how the quality of such relationships varies in practice within kinship and household structures. However, the potential importance of relationship quality does quietly lurk in the literature on women's agency.

An explicit reference to the potential importance of relationship quality comes in Basu's (2006) commentary on the neglect of emotions in understanding demographic outcomes. As Basu notes, "birth, death, and marriage, underlying staples of demographic research, are heart-over-head matters. And yet, if there is one organ that is palpably missing from the discourses of demography, it is the heart" (ibid: 107). Basu goes on to make the case that emotions are important factors in determining demographic outcomes and reproductive health specifically. She discusses several cases where existing research points to the importance of emotions, such as in the reduction in the interval from marriage to first birth in Asia. She also speculates about other areas where emotions may play critical roles. One of the areas that Basu speculates about is women's agency. She suggests that:

" Perhaps, once a suitable survey instrument has been designed, it will be found that love, if only it can be sustained, is as empowering as other 'demographic' variables like education and economic independence. It is not so surprising that in much popular fiction, the stereotypical South Asian mother's biggest nightmare is that her son will fall in love with his wife. The fictional mother-in-law knows that this is the surest way of dismantling her control over household affairs" (ibid:117).

Some ethnographic work on women's agency also explicitly brings up aspects of relationship quality, suggesting that it may be a source of agency. In her ethnography of rural Bangladesh, White (1992) found that the quality of women's family relationships affected the extent to which women control assets. She describes the case of Minu whose "undoubted power" stemmed from the fact that her husband "adored her from the first" and this love gave her confidence. Also in Bangladesh, Kabear (2000) speculates that the extent to which women are able to negotiate husbands and other family members taking on household work so that they are better able to take on factory employment varied

according to “the degree of harmony in the relationship.” She presents the case of Anwara who was aided in taking up factor work by good relations with her husband and other family members who helped her by taking on some of her household work. By contrast, Sahara who had a “fairly conflictual relationship with her husband, clearly had no choice in the matter of housework” and had to keep up with all of her regular household tasks while maintaining factory employment (Kabeer 2000:124).

Other work suggests that relationship quality may determine women’s access to other sources of agency or act as a mediating factor. In Bangladesh, women explained the fact that their husbands registered land in their names as acts of love and gratitude (Kabeer 2001b). Some studies have found that women who own land have greater agency (Allendorf 2007; Mason 1998).⁴ Thus, if relationship quality works to increase women’s ownership of land and other assets it may indirectly increase agency. A potential mediating role of relationship quality is suggested by Jejeebhoy (1995) in an evaluation of the connection between education and women’s agency in India. She suggests that concerns about relationship quality may be a mechanism linking education to agency. She speculates that parents-in-law give educated daughters-in-law greater power so that the daughter-in-law is content with the household situation and will not draw the son’s loyalty away from his parents, creating a break in their emotional or residential bond.

Some quantitative work on women’s agency, male involvement, and reproductive health also touches on aspects of relationship quality. Mullany et al. (2005) use a measure of marital quality in their assessment of whether women’s autonomy impedes male involvement in pregnancy health in Kathmandu, Nepal. Among their indicators of male involvement is a measure of emotional support – whether the wife would share first with her husband if she had a big problem worrying her. While they

⁴ Allendorf (2007a) found that women landowners in Nepal have greater agency. Mason (1998) found that women landowners have greater agency in India and Thailand, but not in Malaysia, Pakistan, or the Philippines.

use it as a measure of male involvement, this measure also gets at a potential aspect of marital quality. Their results do not provide support for the role of relationship quality however. They find that emotional support does not have a significant effect on women's agency. In a study that explores women's agency as one of the mechanisms linking spousal communication and family planning use in Nepal, Sharan and Valente (2002) also unintentionally explore aspects of relationship quality and women's agency. They find a positive association between spousal communication and joint decision-making among couples. They speculate that couples who communicate more perceive their spouse to be more supportive. If spousal communication is also taken as an indicator of marital quality, than their findings provide some support that marital quality may enhance women's agency.⁵

The Role of Domestic Violence

There is also one area where relationship quality and women's agency explicitly come under scrutiny together – the area of domestic violence. Domestic violence is a dimension of relationship quality. In line with this categorization, domestic violence itself, or more general measures of conflict and fighting that may tap into domestic violence, are often included in measures of marital quality in Western contexts (Glenn 1990; Bryant et al. 2001; Amato and Booth 1995; Skinner et al. 2002; Hassebrauck and Fehr 2002).⁶ In the more relevant context of rural Nepal, Hoelter et al. (2004)

⁵ Unfortunately, given their focus on family planning, their measure of communication only includes discussion of family planning issues. Older couples for whom family planning is no longer relevant are less likely to discuss family planning, regardless of their marital quality. So, their measure of spousal communication is of limited use as a broad indicator of marital quality.

⁶ The inclusion of domestic violence specifically, or of conflict and fighting, is not universal. Some studies do not include these aspects in measures of marital quality, including those that use global measures of general marital satisfaction or happiness (e.g. Kaufman and Taniguchi 2006; Ng et al. 2008). People's experience with domestic violence may factor into their evaluation of their marital happiness or satisfaction however. Interestingly, in their study of whether the detrimental effect of divorce on health is mediated by marital happiness, Waite et al. (2009) use a global measure of marital happiness, but also control for domestic violence. They include no discussion of why domestic violence is used as a control variable, but its inclusion suggests that they do not view domestic violence as an aspect of marital quality.

developed measures of different dimensions of marital quality using ethnographic fieldwork in which they identified domestic violence as one dimension.

At the same time, however, domestic violence is also seen by some as a dimension of women's agency (Kishor 2000⁷; Agarwala and Lynch 2006; Jejeebhoy 2000; Malhotra and Schuler 2005). Domestic violence occasionally falls under the purview of women's agency for two related reasons, neither of which is consistent with the definition used here. First, some categorizations of domestic violence as an aspect of women's agency fall under the pattern of labeling whatever is "good" for women as empowerment. Since I limit the definition to women's exercise of choice, this falls outside my definition. Second, some contend that domestic violence is an aspect of women's (lack of) agency because violence limits women's freedom to make choices (Jejeebhoy 2000; Malhotra and Schuler 2005). This categorization conflates a potential determinant of agency with agency itself. Women's agency is the ability to exercise choice. Experiencing domestic violence, or believing that the use of domestic violence is justified in some circumstances, does not *directly* reflect on a woman's ability to exercise choice. The extent to which experience of – or attitudes about – domestic violence are connected to women's ability to make choices is an empirical question.

A handful of studies do explore the link between women's agency and relationship quality by exploring the link between agency and domestic violence. Two relevant studies view domestic violence as a dimension of agency and, thus, evaluate the association between domestic violence and agency while exploring associations among dimensions of agency using data from India (Jejeebhoy 2000;

⁷ Kishor (2000) presents a mixed case. In accordance with the definition used here, she identifies experience of being beaten as a setting (determinant) of empowerment, but – contrary to the definition used here – she identifies acceptance of wife beating as a direct indicator of empowerment.

Agarwala and Lynch 2006).⁸ These studies are of limited value for my purposes since they present what are largely or entirely bivariate associations. However, they do find that women who experience domestic violence have lower levels of agency. Two other studies reflect on the connection between domestic violence and agency while exploring the determinants of domestic violence. Unlike the studies discussed above, these studies use multivariate analyses that control for potential confounding factors. Hindin and Adair (2002) find in the Philippines that couples where the husband *or* wife dominate decision-making have the highest levels of abuse, while couples with joint decision-making have the lowest levels of abuse. In Bangladesh, Koenig et al. (2003) find that the effect of women's agency on domestic violence varied by research site. In the more culturally conservative site, women's individual agency was a risk factor for violence and women's agency aggregated to the community level had no association with violence. In the less conservative site, women's individual agency was a weak protective factor – with marginal statistical significance – and women's community level agency was a clear protective factor. Both studies speculate that violence is a response to women's agency. Hindin and Adair conclude that a backlash towards women's agency should be explored, while Koenig et al. similarly speculate that violence is an initial response to women's empowerment, but tapers off as women's increased levels of agency become more accepted.

Taken together these studies have two main lessons for the connections between domestic violence and women's agency. First, these studies show a mix of results. There is some evidence that there is no association between agency and violence, that there is a negative association, and that there is a positive association. These differences may be due to different cultural settings and changes over

⁸They use the same data set, which should have the same results, although the questions that they include and the construction of their measures (and methods) are slightly different. Agarwala and Lynch use confirmatory factor analysis to create their factors, while Jejeebhoy creates indexes by summing responses to different questions.

time in women's agency (ie. empowerment). Thus, these results reinforce the potential importance of context and do not provide unmitigated support of my hypothesis. Second, the work focusing on domestic violence frames women's agency as a determinant of domestic violence. I hypothesize the opposite, that domestic violence – and relationship quality more broadly with a focus on love and more positive aspects – is a determinant of agency. As is often the case with the complex social world, their framing reinforces that causal connections may very well go in both directions between women's agency and relationship quality.

Entering by Another Door?: Marital Power and Marital Quality

While the literature on women's agency neglects the quality of family relationships, research on marital quality regularly postulates a connection between a measure of women's agency and marital quality. Studies on the determinants of marital quality in Western contexts find that couples who make decision together have greater marital quality than couples where one spouse dominates decision-making (Blood and Wolfe 1960; Rogers and Amato 2000; Amato et al. 2003). The focus on Western contexts makes this work of potentially limited relevance to South Asia and other settings where the cultural and economic contexts differ. Recently, however, some studies have begun to apply this same question and approach to non-Western contexts (Miller and Kannae 1999; Orgill and Heaton 2005; Xu and Lai 2004; Pimentel 2006; Shukla and Kapoor 1990). Of the Asian studies, the Taiwanese and Chinese studies are consistent with the Western studies and find that couples that share decision-making have greater marital quality (Pimentel 2006; Xu and Lai 2004). However, the Indian study provides slightly different results (Shukla and Kapoor 1990). Shukla and Kapoor find that couples who make decisions together and couples where the husband dominates decision-making have the greatest marital satisfaction compared to couples where the wife dominates or they have equal power, but make decisions separately. However, Shukla and Kapoor's findings are of limited value since they use a

nonprobability sample of 130 upper middle class couples from urban India and present only a bivariate association.

These studies' findings are partially, but not entirely, supportive of the hypothesis that relationship quality is a source of women's agency. To the extent that women exercise greater agency in the gender egalitarian couples than in the husband dominant couples, these results are consistent with my hypothesis. However, to the extent that women exercise more power in wife dominant couples than in the egalitarian couples, the results are not consistent with my hypothesis. Given that these measures were constructed to compare shared decision-making power versus unshared, rather than variation in women's power, these analyses are not the best test of my hypothesis. However, these results do suggest that marital quality may support women's agency up to a certain point, but not beyond. That point may be where wives begin to exercise greater power than their husbands.

These studies also point to the importance of causation going in both directions between women's agency and relationship quality. Just as the domestic violence studies did, they pose the opposite of my hypothesis – that marital power (women's agency) is a determinant of marital quality. These studies give little attention to the potential for causation going in the other direction. Amato and Booth (1995) do note that causation might go in the other direction and speculate that bad marriages may make women less conventional in the US. Shukla and Kapoor (1990) note that the association between marital power and marital satisfaction may possibly result from a causal effect going in both or either direction. They conclude though, without giving any reason, that it seems more likely that power influences marital satisfaction. Thus, these authors all conclude that their results support that gender egalitarianism, as demonstrated through attitudes or behavior, promotes marital satisfaction. For example, Xu and Lai (2004: 349) conclude that their findings "support [their] assertion that egalitarian gender ideology can result in an equitable distribution of marital power, then marital bonds, in turn, can

be strengthened and the well-being of marriage can be improved.” No one appears to have considered the notion that love and marital quality more broadly may, alternatively or additionally, motivate couples to make decisions together.

These studies also pose a common limitation when examined in light of the South Asian context. Given their origins in the Western context, these studies are concerned with marital dynamics within a nuclear household. In other words, they assume that the only relevant relationship in the household is between a husband and wife. This assumption is dubious when applied to contexts where joint families are common or viewed as a dominant family form. In the context of joint families, it is often older in-laws, including young women’s mothers-in-law who dominate decision-making in the household. Thus, evaluations of women’s agency (or marital power) cannot focus on a married couple in isolation. Other household and family members can and do make decisions, other relationships besides the marital one are relevant, and the interaction of gender with generation must be considered.

III. Data and Methods

The questions of this paper are addressed using two different sets of data. The question of *whether* women with greater relationship quality have greater agency was addressed using an analysis of secondary survey data from Madhya Pradesh. The question of *how* family relationship quality and women’s agency are linked was addressed with collection and analysis of qualitative data from a village in Darjeeling District, West Bengal. The difference in the sites where the data were collected presents a limitation. These sites share many similarities, including the dominance of the joint family system, the Hindu religion, the caste system, the same central government and its accompanying health care system, the dominance of agriculture, and a love of Bollywood movies and Hindi television serials. However, there are also important differences between them. The two places are populated by different ethnic groups who speak different languages and live in geographically distinct areas.

Darjeeling District is situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, near the northern edge of the country, while Madhya Pradesh sits at the geographic heart of India. In keeping with broader gender differences between the hills and the plains in South Asia (Niraula and Morgan 1996), Darjeeling District is generally characterized by greater gender equality than Madhya Pradesh.

Survey Data and Analysis

Data

The survey data come from the Women's Reproductive Histories Survey (WRHS), a survey of 2,444 married women aged 15-39 with at least one child in Madhya Pradesh, India. The survey was undertaken in 2002 by the International Center for Research on Women and the International Institute for Population Studies. Respondents were selected through a stratified cluster sample with a response rate of 97%. WRHS was designed to gather data on women's experiences of abortion. Therefore, while it is a cross-sectional survey, it includes data pertaining to the time of survey, as well as a unique set of retrospective data. The retrospective data cover the time from the respondents' marriage to the time of interview using a narrative framework anchored on key events in women's lives.

Measures

Dependent variable: Women's Agency

The measure of women's agency is an index based on several questions on women's ability to make decisions about their own mobility and spending decisions at the time of interview. Women were asked about their mobility in reference to six places: the local market, nearby health center or health services provider, nearby temple or other religious place, home of relatives or friends, cinema or other place of entertainment, and outside of her village or town. The response options included 1) not being able to go at all; 2) going only with a companion; 3) going only with permission; and 4) can go without

permission or after informing someone. The spending decision questions asked about women's ability to purchase eight different items, including food, a small household item, medicine for a child, medicine for herself, a gift, a sari for herself, a small piece of jewelry for herself, and a big household item. The response options included 1) only with permission; 2) with consultation; and 3) without permission or informing.

Exploratory factor analysis was used to create an agency index from these measures of mobility and spending. Exploratory factor analysis allowed for an inductive identification of latent agency variables without presupposing the number or weighting of the latent variables. Since the variables are ordinal, a polychoric correlation matrix was used in the factor analysis (Kolenikov and Angeles 2009). The correlation matrix was also weighted to prevent bias that would result from not taking the survey design into account (Skinner et al. 1986). After completing the factor analysis only one factor was retained. The factor analysis resulted in a first factor with an eigenvalue of 8.7 that explained 62% of the shared variance in the agency measures. The second factor has an eigenvalue of 1.4 and explained 10% of the shared variance. The remaining factors had eigenvalues below one and explained 5% or less of the shared variance. After a factor analysis there are two widely used tests used to determine how many factors to retain – the screeplot test and an eigenvalue of 1 cutoff test. The screeplot test strongly indicated that only one factor should be retained. As seen in figure 1, the first factor stands out markedly above the others, while the other factors form the classic sloping scree line. However, at a value of 1.45 the second factor does have an eigenvalue greater than one. Thus, the eigenvalue of one rule of thumb indicates retaining two factors. However, since the second factor's eigenvalue is only marginally above one and the results of the screeplot test are so strong, I retained only the first factor. This decision to retain only one factor is further supported by the relatively high correlation between the first and second factors. After an oblique (promax) rotation, the first two factors have a correlation

of 0.6. Further, since it accounts for 62% of the shared variance, the first factor accounts for a substantial amount of the variation in the variation in the agency measures. Additionally, the agency measures all load very well onto the first factor with loadings generally well above 0.5 (see table 1).

Independent Variables: Quality of Family Relationships

Relationship with husband

The quality of the relationship with the respondent's husband is measured with three variables. The first variable comes from a question which asked women how their relations with their husband were, and followed with a second question on whether they got along well or whether there were difficulties and problems in the period just after her most recent pregnancy ended. Respondents could indicate that they had many, some, or very few difficulties with their husband. In the multivariate analysis, this measure is reduced to a dummy variable with a one indicating that the respondent had very few difficulties with her husband just after her most recent pregnancy ended and a zero indicating that she had many or some difficulties with her husband at that time.

The second variable measuring the quality of the marital relationship is a measure of domestic violence. Women were asked whether their husband had beaten or slapped them in the past twelve months. They were also asked whether their husband had threatened to abandon them or throw them out of the house in the last year. Almost all women whose husbands threatened to abandon them also experienced physical violence. Thus, responses from these two questions are combined to create a three category measure of domestic violence: 1) experienced no violence; 2) experienced physical violence only; and 3) husband threatened to abandon her. 92% of women in this third category who experienced the threat of abandonment or being thrown out of the house also experienced physical violence.

The third and final measure of the quality of the marital relationship is an indicator of who is most important to the respondent's husband. Respondents were asked "most of the time, do you feel that your husband's first loyalty is to you or to his parents?" The response options included the respondent, her husband's parents, the respondent and the parents equally, and someone else. Five women reported that their husband's first loyalty was to someone else and ten women reported that they did not know who came first for their husbands. Since so few respondents chose these two options these responses were grouped with the husband's primary loyalty being to his parents. This variable was also further adjusted for family structure. Many of these women who responded that they came first for their husbands likely did so simply because their husband no longer had parents. In this case, the woman's response is determined by the availability of family members, rather than the quality of her relationship with her husband. So, an additional category was created which includes all respondents whose husband did not have parents at the time of the interview. Thus, the final variable indicating who came first for the respondent's husband includes four categories: 1) the husband's parents; 2) the parents and the respondent equally; 3) the respondent; and 4) husband does not have (living) parents.

These three measures of marital quality are used separately in the following multivariate analysis. The possibility of combining these variables into a single measure of marital quality was explored using factor analysis. However, the variables did not load satisfactorily onto a single factor. Exploratory factor analysis using the difficulties, first loyalty, and two original violence variables separately indicated retaining one factor. However, the resulting factor accounted for only 38% of the shared variance in these four variables. Further, while the two violence variables loaded well, with values above 0.8, the first loyalty and difficulties variables loaded poorly with loading values of 0.2 and

very high uniqueness scores. Following this factor analysis, the violence variables are combined into a single measure, as described above, while the other measures are used independently.

Relationship with in-laws

There is one measure of the relationship with in-laws. Just as for husbands, respondents were asked how relations were with their in-laws just after their most recent pregnancy ended. This first question on relations was followed up with a probe on whether they got along well or whether there were difficulties and problem. Unlike the husband variable, this in-law relations variable also includes a category for those who do not have (living) in-laws. Thus, the measure of in-law relations includes the following categories: 1) respondent has many difficulties with in-laws; 2) respondent has some difficulties with in-laws; 3) respondent has very few difficulties with in-laws; and 4) respondent has no in-laws. Due to the small number of women with many difficulties with their in-laws, the first two categories are combined in the multivariate analysis.

Relationship with parents

The only measure of the quality of relationship with parents is an indicator of how often women visited their parents at the time of interview. Specifically, women are grouped into four categories: 1) visiting their parents less than once a year; 2) once a year; 3) every month; and 4) every week. This measure mixes the quality of the relationship with distance to the natal home. Parents usually must invite women home in order for a visit to occur and presumably are more likely to do so if they have a close relationship with their daughter. In this sense, this measure provides an indication of the quality of the parental relationship. However, the farther away parents live, visits become more difficult and expensive making visits less frequent, even in the case of very close relationships. This measure is further complicated by other family relationships. In general, women need to get the permission of their in-laws and/or husband to make a visit to their parents, especially if they do not live close by.

Thus, frequent visits may also indicate that the respondent's husband or in-laws are particularly willing to let her visit her parents.

Control variables

Basic contextual controls for urban residence and household wealth are included in the analysis. Other contextual controls, including caste, religion, husband's occupation, and husband's education were included in earlier models. These variables are not included in the final analysis because they were consistently insignificant and did not affect the results of the family relationship variables. Urban residence is a dummy variable with a one indicating that the respondent lives in an urban area. The measure of household wealth is a factor obtained from a principle components analysis. The survey included several categorical and dichotomous measures of household wealth, including measures of housing materials and ownership of consumer durables and assets. To properly account for the categorical nature of the variables and the weighted nature of the sample, the principle components analysis is based on a weighted polychoric correlation matrix (Kolenikov and Angeles 2009). Both the screeplot and eigenvalue cutoff tests strongly indicated retaining only one factor from the principle components analysis. The resulting wealth factor accounts for 53% of the total variance in the original wealth measures.

Four other sources of agency were also included as controls, including age, education, employment, and having two sons. The respondents' age is included in five year groups. The measure of education includes categories for no schooling, less than a school leaving certificate (SLC), and a school leaving certificate or more. The school leaving certificate, which is obtained after completing ten years of schooling and passing a test, is roughly equivalent to completing high school in the United States. The measure of employment is a simple dummy measure indicating whether the respondent worked outside the household or not. 95% of women who worked were laborers. Thus, there is not

enough occupational variation to include a more nuanced measure of employment. Finally, completing the familial obligation to bear sons and continue the family line is another potential source of agency. Bearing sons may also improve family relations. Thus, a dummy variable indicating whether women had two sons is also included. Other potential sources of agency, including age at marriage (*gauna*), length of marriage, and difference in age compared to husband were included in earlier models. These variables were later dropped because they did not affect the results of the family variables and were too collinear with age or consistently insignificant.

Finally, two measures of women's level of agency at the time of marriage are also included as controls. The two measures of women's agency at the time of marriage are ordinal variables that measure the amount of choice women had over spending and their mobility. For mobility, women were asked in reference to the time just after they were married, "What kind of restrictions did you face personally? Were you able to come and go as you pleased, or did you have to seek permission?" Response categories include 1) too many restrictions; 2) several restrictions; 3) a few restrictions; and 4) no restrictions. For spending, respondents were asked again in reference to the time just after they were married, "Were you able to spend money as you pleased, or did you have to seek permission?" The response categories included 1) only with permission; 2) usually with permission; 3) sometimes with permission; and 4) without permission. Descriptive statistics for all of the variables used in the analysis appear in table 2.

Analysis

All analyses are presented separately by family structure since the effect of the family relationship variables are likely to vary by the different family contexts. Moreover, interpretation of the results is furthered by better understanding the family context that women live in. Family structure is a key determinant of household power relations. In joint households, where women reside with their in-

laws, the father and mother-in-law are traditionally the most important decision makers in the household. Thus, in joint households, women's relations with their in-laws are likely to play a more important role than in nuclear households. By comparison, in nuclear households where the husband is the traditional decision maker, the marital relationship may play a bigger role in determining women's participation in household decisions.

Respondents are divided into two categories of family structure: joint and nuclear. Families are categorized as joint if the respondent resided with her father-in-law, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, or sister-in-law. If none of these in-laws were present, women are categorized as residing in a nuclear family. A handful of women who did not live with in-laws resided with natal family members, including six women who lived with their fathers, six who lived with their mothers, and one who lived with both of her own parents. Residing with natal family members is substantially different than residing with in-laws – the traditional joint family household. Yet the number of women residing with natal family members is too small to comprise a category by itself. Therefore, they were grouped in with the nuclear households.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative data consist of 1) fieldnotes from an ethnographic introduction to the village of Pariwarbasti⁹ in Darjeeling District and observation of family life and health care and 2) transcripts of semi-structured interviews with members of selected village households. The author completed fieldwork in Darjeeling District from September 2007-May 2008. The semi-structured interviews were undertaken with members of 22 households in the village. These households were selected from a list

⁹ Pariwarbasti is a pseudonym.

of all households in the village that had a birth in the past year.¹⁰ Households were selected based on observed variation in family structure and potential variation in family relationship quality. Half of the households were joint households where the woman who had the birth (referred to as the focus woman) resided with her in-laws, while the other half were non-joint households where the focus woman resided in a nuclear household or with her natal family. Repeated interviews were undertaken by the author in Nepali with focus women (n=22) and, if available, their co-resident husbands (n=14), and co-resident mothers or mothers-in-law (n=10). All interviews were recorded and later transcribed and translated by native Nepali speakers. Details on the data collection and village context are provided by Allendorf (2008).

These data were analyzed by the author to identify mechanisms linking family relationship quality and women's agency. Analysis consisted of two main approaches. First, themes were inductively identified by reading over the fieldnotes and transcripts using an iterative combination of open and focused coding schemes using Nvivo software. Second, a set of matrices were created to summarize and compare cases across households and family members. Each matrix summarized topics in the data found across the different interviews and fieldnotes, for example, how family members got married, how they make decisions about purchasing food, when and why they left school, and what their relationship with their spouse is like. These matrices were used as another tool to look for patterns and connections between women's agency and family relationship quality across family members and households. As part of the larger project these data were also analyzed to explore the meaning of relationship quality for three family dyads: 1) husbands and wives, 2) daughters-in-law and

¹⁰ The fieldwork was undertaken as part of a broader project that focused on maternal and child health as well. Thus, households were limited to those that had a birth in the last year to ensure that maternal and child health were relevant to the households.

mothers-in-law, and 3) married daughters and natal family (mainly parents). These results are not the focus of this paper, but are also drawn on here.

IV. Results

a. Identifying the links between family relationship quality and women's agency

A multivariate analysis using linear regression is presented to test the hypothesis that women with greater family relationship quality have higher levels of agency (table 3). The standard errors in these models are adjusted to control for clustering of respondents by the primary sampling unit and district in the survey. As discussed above, all analyses are presented separately for women in nuclear and joint families. Further, for each family type, two models are presented. The first model includes the family relationship variables and a set of controls that include basic contextual controls and other sources of agency. As described above, the contextual control variables comprise household wealth and urban residence. The other sources of agency include age, education, whether the woman works outside the household, and whether she has two or more sons. The second model adds the measures of women's agency at the time of marriage.

These measures of agency at the time of marriage are added to control for reverse causation. I hypothesize that higher quality relationships increase women's agency. Thus, I expect to find that women with higher quality relationships have higher levels of agency. However, such a correlation may also be due to causation going in the opposite direction. Having greater agency may make a woman more likely to have a high quality relationship. For example, women with greater agency may be more likely to choose their spouse and thus may be more likely to have a higher quality marital relationship (at least in the beginning of a marriage) since they are likely to choose someone they have a good relationship with. As discussed below, I also find that women who are given greater freedom by their

family members are also more likely to perceive those relationships as being of a higher quality. In other words, women love and appreciate family members who let them do what they want. So, some amount of reverse causation is still an issue however.

Natal Family Visits

Women in nuclear families who visit their natal family every week do have significantly higher levels of agency. Women who visit their natal families at least once a year and every month do not have higher levels of agency compared to women who visit less than once a year. Women in natal families who visit their natal families every week score 2.6 points higher on the agency index than those who visit their families less than once a year. The association is not significant for women in joint families though. Women in joint families who visit their natal families every week score 1.4 points higher on the agency index, but the result is not significant. However, this difference in significance in the results between joint and nuclear families may be due to a difference in statistical power. The proportion of women in joint families who visit their families every week is only 3.6%, roughly half of the proportion for women in nuclear families. 7.5% of women in nuclear families visit their family once a week. Thus, the proportion of women in joint families visiting their natal families every week may be too small to reach significance. Moreover, in a pooled model with women from both family types, an interaction term for natal family visits and family structure is not significant. Thus, the difference in the coefficients between women in joint and nuclear families is not significant.

Relationship with Husband

In nuclear families, women who have very few difficulties with their husbands also have greater agency. Women in nuclear families who have very few difficulties with their husband score significantly higher on the agency index, with 1.4 more points than women who have many or some difficulties. In joint families, however, there is no association. In joint families, the coefficient for very few difficulties

with husband is 0.8 and not significant. This result suggests that having very few difficulties with husbands has a positive effect on women's agency in nuclear families, but not in joint families. However, the differences in these coefficients are not significant. In a pooled model with women from both family types, an interaction term for very few difficulties with husband by family structure is not significant.

After controlling for other factors, the effect of husbands' loyalty has a strong effect for women in both nuclear and joint families. Women in nuclear families who come first for their husbands score 2.6 points higher on the agency index than women whose husband's parents come first. Women in nuclear families whose husbands have no parents score nearly as high as women who have the primary loyalty of their husbands. They score 2.4 more points on the agency index than women whose husband's parents come first. Thus, it appears that having no parents-in-law has the same positive impact on agency as having the husband's primary loyalty. This result highlights the role that in-laws can play in decision-making, even when they do not reside in the same household. Women whose husband's have equal loyalty to both them and his parents score 0.6 points more on the agency index than women who husband's primary loyalty is to his parents only, but the result is not significant.

Similar results are seen for women in joint families. Women in joint families who have their husband's primary loyalty score 3.5 points higher on the agency index compared to women whose husband's primary loyalty is to his parents. Women in joint families whose husband's primary loyalty is to them and his parents equally score 0.8 points higher on the agency index. This result, however, is marginally significant with a two-tailed p-value of 0.08. These point estimates for women in joint families are higher than for women in nuclear families, suggesting that husband's loyalty has a greater effect on women's agency in joint families. However, the differences in the coefficients are not

significant. In a pooled model, the interaction term for husband's loyalty by family structure is not statistically significant.

After controlling for other factors, the effect of husband's violence on women's agency disappears. For women in nuclear families, the coefficient for experiencing physical violence only is 0 and for reporting threats of abandonment it is -0.5. Not surprisingly, neither coefficient is statistically significant. For women in joint families, the coefficient for experiencing physical violence is 0.3 and for reporting threats of abandonment it is 0.9. Again, neither result is statistically significant different from zero.

Relationship with In-Laws

Good relations with in-laws have a positive significant effect on agency for women in joint families, but not for women in nuclear families. In joint families, women who have very few difficulties with their in-laws score 1.7 points higher on the agency index than those who have many or some difficulties with their in-laws. This coefficient is significant with a p-value below 0.01. In nuclear families, women who have very few difficulties with their in-laws score 1 point higher on the agency index, but this result is not statistically significant. However, the difference between joint and nuclear families in these relations with in-laws coefficients is not statistically significant. In a pooled model, an interaction term for in-law relations by family structure is not statistically significant.

Relative Importance of Family Relationship Quality

While the discussion above suggests that the quality of family relationships is a source of women's agency, the obvious follow up question is how important are family relationships? Is the quality of family relationships more or less efficacious than other determinants of agency? To address this question I explore the amount of variance explained by the quality of family relationship variables and compare the relative size of the quality of family relationship variables to those of the other

independent variables. The contextual variables and other sources of agency presented in table 3, as well as those dropped from the analysis, are not an exhaustive list of potential sources of agency. They do comprise the most commonly addressed sources of agency, however, particularly with the inclusion of education and employment.

First, the quality of family relationships, as measured here, explains roughly five percent of the variation in women's agency. Specifically, among women residing in nuclear families the quality of family relationships accounts for 3.4% of the variation in women's agency. While among women residing in joint families the quality of family relationships accounts for 6.7% of the variation in women's agency. These percentages are taken from subtracting the r-squared value from the model with controls and agency at time of marriage measures from the r-squared value from the same model with the measures of family relationship quality included.

Second, the size of the relationship variables, particularly who comes first for the husband, compare relatively favorably with other sources of agency, although their importance differs by family structure. In nuclear families, visiting the natal family ever week and coming first for their husband are two of the most influential determinants of agency. Coming first for their husband is also one of the most important determinants of women's agency in joint families. In joint families, unlike nuclear families, having very few difficulties with in-laws is also an important determinant of agency for women in joint families, while natal family visits and having very few difficulties with their husband are not important determinants. One clear exception, however, is domestic violence. Domestic violence is not an important determinant of agency since it has no effect on women's agency once agency at the time of marriage is controlled for.

b. Exploring the mechanisms linking family relationship quality and women's agency

The examination of the qualitative data suggests that within the marital household, family relationship quality works to increase women's agency in two main ways. First, better relationships enhance women's agency by making young women feel more comfortable voicing and asserting their preferences. Second, better relationships enhance women's agency by motivating family members to give women greater space to exercise their agency. Below I discuss how these two main links play out in different ways.

She Speaks and We Listen

One important mechanism linking relationship quality and women's agency by both motivating women to be more assertive and family members to give them more space is communication. Good communication with family members is one of the chief ways that relationship quality is expressed. Close, loving relationships are expressed through sharing with each other and listening to each other. While antagonistic and tense relationships are expressed through scolding, fighting, and lack of communication entirely. This pattern presents a critical link between relationship quality and women's agency. While some family decisions are made unilaterally by one person, much of the time decision-making involves the participation of several family members in one way or another. For example, in the case of a sick child, one family member may note that the child is sick and another may suggest that the child requires care. Other family members may suggest alternatives to treat the child and discuss the relative merits of each. Finally, one or more of the family members must choose an alternative and then carry it out. So, decision-making as a process often involves substantial communication between family members.

Young women are more likely to insert themselves into this process of decision-making when they are more comfortable communicating with family members. Women are more inclined to share

with family members that they have close, loving relationships with. So, simply put, women are more likely to ask or demand that their wishes be met of those they get along with. For example, as Kamala describes she is better able to exercise agency after her marriage because she feels more comfortable requesting things of her husband, whom she is very close with, than she did of her parents, “My power to make decisions has become greater after marriage. ... Now I can tell my husband, but before I was afraid to tell my parents. ... Now, I discuss with my husband. Let’s do this and that. I can tell him.”

Two examples of different women attempting to provide their sick children with health care demonstrate how good relationships can encourage women to voice and then exercise their choices. Ranjita’s baby once developed a large boil on his head and a high fever. She pointed his sickness out to her mother-in-law who said that they should take the baby to a traditional healer, but Ranjita felt that the baby required medical care at the hospital in a nearby town. So, Ranjita called her husband, who was working in town at the time, because she is very close with him and she knew she could depend on him to listen to her. She told him that the baby was ill and needed to go to the hospital and arranged to meet her husband at the hospital where he would give her money for the baby’s treatment. By contrast, Purvi’s poor relationship with her mother-in-law proved a barrier for when her baby was sick. Purvi’s baby had developed angry sores all over her skin. Purvi took the baby to the health center for free treatment, but the health center didn’t have the appropriate medicines to treat the baby. They recommended that she take the baby to the hospital to see a doctor. However, Purvi did not have her own money to pay for such treatment and was too afraid to ask her mother-in-law for the money because they have a fractious relationship and she was afraid her mother-in-law would scold her and refuse to give her the money. A few weeks later, when the baby’s sores showed no signs of healing, Purvi’s mother-in-law did eventually give Purvi some money to treat the baby of her own accord. These examples suggest that for Ranjita, a close family relationship provided the security to voice and then

exercise her preference that her child receive medical treatment. By contrast, Purvi's poor relationship with her mother-in-law acted as a barrier from voicing and, thus, exercising her desire to provide her child with medical treatment.

Family members are also more likely to draw women into the process of decision-making when they have close relationships and there are strong patterns of communication. For example, above Kamala described how she feels free to tell her husband Kamalnath what she wants. In turn, Kamalnath notes that once he knows what Kamala wants because she tells him, he makes sure to buy those things: "Whatever [Kamala] wants to eat, she tells me to bring. Then I bring it." Similarly, Mayuri's family is one of the most loving families where all the members get along extremely well. The head of the family is Mayuri's mother-in-law, Maya. Maya describes how the fact that everyone gets along well means that Mayuri both listens to them and feels free to make her own suggestions about how things should be done and that the family listens to Mayuri's suggestions and those of everyone: "Well, we get along well. [Mayuri] listens to what we tell her. She also tells us what she feels about things and we listen to her suggestions." Building on this inclusionary description, Mayuri too describes how the way her family makes decisions involves everyone talking together to decide what to do – again reinforcing the importance of getting along and communication in determining her participation in family decisions: "If we have an issue then the entire family sits down and each person is given an opportunity to express their thoughts. Then everyone agrees."

Showing Love through Choice

Another aspect of better relationships enhancing women's agency by motivating family members to give women greater space to exercise their agency is the idea that giving such space is itself an expression of affection. Several women noted how their husbands or in-laws giving them freedom to choose their clothes, food, or in general listening to them and doing what they want is a way of showing

their love. For example, when I asked Kamala how her husband felt about her Kamala remarked, “[My husband] loves me. He asks me what I want to wear.” In this statement Kamala suggests that her husband consulting her about her preferences, in this case about clothes, is proof of his love. Similarly, when I asked Vinita what a husband and wife might do to show their love she explicitly suggests that making decisions together is a way of expressing love: “What can I say they do to show their love? ... They talk sweetly and discuss issues and make decisions together. The love is in their hearts.” Similarly in regard to in-laws, Sahila noted that she wants to have a good relationship with her own daughter-in-law and that she will do that in part by letting her daughter-in-law do what she wants:

“I feel that the relation between the mother-in-law and the father-in-law should always be good. One day my son will get married and bring a daughter-in-law home. Then I will make sure that I am good to her. I will make sure that I do not give her a chance to complain and I will also make sure that I do not talk badly about my daughter-in-law. I will make sure that I let my daughter-in-law do as she wishes, wear the clothes she wants, and eat what she wants.”

The connection described above suggests that the causal chain moves from loving, close relationships to providing women greater freedom to express their agency. However, there is also evidence to suggest that the causal relationship simultaneously goes in the opposite direction. In other words, it also appears that women develop better relationships with family members that give them more freedom or perceive that their relationships are better when the person gives them more freedom. Manisha, for example, notes that her husband is good and therefore her life is good because her husband gives her more freedom to do as she wishes: “My husband does not dominate me. He listens to me. He’s good. That’s why I’m happy. My life is good.” While Manisha has a good marital relationship because her husband does what she says, in the opposite vein, Imelda describes how her relationship with her in-laws was poor because they did not allow her to make her own choices:

“At the time of my first child, I was not able to do things that I wished. I did not get to travel and wear the things that I wanted to. My in-laws were strict. I did not get to eat the things I wanted

to and do the things that I wanted to. You can imagine how it was to live with them. I was neglected by them.”

Finally, Saloni gets along well with her father-in-law, but has a very tense relationship with her mother-in-law. When asked why her father-in-law is very good she notes that he lets her do what she wants, unlike her mother-in-law: “[My father-in-law] is very good. ... He says yes to everything and never says no to anything, but I get a no for everything from my mother-in-law.”

Trust and Mobility

Another important facet of relationship quality that motivates family members to give women greater space to exercise agency is that of trust and fidelity. For married couples there is a strong belief that fidelity and trust are a key aspect of a good relationship. Husbands, in particular, are sometimes worried about their wives sexual fidelity and are suspicious of their wives interactions with other men. Husbands who do not trust their wives limit their wives agency, especially their wives’ ability to make choices about their own mobility. While women roam about Pariwarbasti on their own, most of the women I interviewed have to ask permission of both their husband and, often their in-laws as well, to do so. Thus, husbands’ agreeing to requests to go somewhere or not requiring that the women ask permission at all are key aspects of women’s ability to make decisions about their own mobility.

This pattern is most clearly illustrated by Salila’s experience. Salila’s first husband did not trust her. He was suspicious that she would have affairs with other men and, thus, limited her mobility to prevent her from interacting with other men. As Salila describes,

“[My first husband] didn’t let me talk. I couldn’t walk around here and there. My own sister, my third sister, died here in a neighborhood below our house and he didn’t let me go. He didn’t let me go when my own sister died. He used to get angry with me so much and beat me because he suspected me of going with other men. ... I was not like that, but still he beat me.”

By contrast, Salila’s second and current husband did trust her and, thus, did not place limitations on her mobility. As Salila describes in relation to the early part of her marriage to her second husband,

“[My second husband] was nice. He never got angry. He didn’t stop me from going anywhere. Do you understand to suspect of going with other men? Some [men] are like that and when you talk with other men they will say that he is my husband, but [my second husband] is not like that at all. We can talk normally and joke. He will not say anything. He is not like that.”

Spending Power

Above I contend that the family dynamics, featuring communication patterns, that come with good relationships enhance women’s agency by encouraging young women to assert themselves and senior family members to consult young women and give them greater space. I also found evidence of another very concrete way in which good family relationships can enhance women’s agency in the household. Many of the decisions that households face feature the allocation of money and other resources. In running the household from day to day, family members must decide what, when, and where to purchase food, what community causes to contribute to, and a host of other small financial decisions. Similarly, more infrequent, but larger decisions, like where to send children to school and where to give birth, also require making decisions about how to spend money. As Manisha notes, “there are so many decisions to be taken. So many, but all require money. Money is the issue.”

For the most part, the primary source of household income for most of the focus households is earned by men. This earning power translates into decision-making power. As Indu describes, “How can we [women] decide? In some matters we cannot. We have no authority to do so. The men earn and bring money home. We cannot decide.” Since they do not earn money directly for the most part, the main way women make spending decisions is by influencing husbands or other senior family members who have money, as described above, or by being given money by family members. Husbands who are absent give their wives money to cover household expenses because they are not there to make purchases themselves. This arrangement is largely a function of living arrangements. For example, Lalima has no senior in-laws and her husband is away working in the army. So he sends Lalima money to manage the household. However, there are also some husbands who reside at home and

regularly give most or all of their earnings to their wives to manage. Among the focus women who lived with their husbands, there are three whose husbands regularly give them his earnings to manage. There are two women, Ranjita and Smita, whose husbands give them their entire earnings to manage. Similarly, Saloni's husband gives some of his earnings to his mother, but gives most of it to Saloni to manage. Mayuri too regularly receives money from her husband as well. Like Lalima's husband, Mayuri's husband is away working, but Mayuri lives in a joint household where her mother-in-law is the head of the household. Mayuri's husband sends money to his mother to run the house, but also chooses to send money to Mayuri for her own use.

In each of these cases, by giving his wife his earnings the husband effectively gives his wife the power to decide how the money is spent. After they've been given the money, the women have more power to decide how to spend the earnings on food and other household goods. Their husbands again ask their wives for money if they want to buy something. As Ranajay describes, "I give the money to Ranjita. ... I give her whatever amount I have earned. Today I earned 100 rupees from work and I will give her the whole amount. If I want to buy tobacco, I will ask her to give me enough money to buy tobacco."

It appears that relationship quality plays a role in facilitating these financial arrangements that give more power to young women. All three of these couples, where the husband gives his earnings to his wife to manage, have exceptionally close relationships. It seems likely that their affectionate relations provide a foundation of trust that encourages the husband to trust his earnings to his wife. There are other couples with close relationships, such as Kamala and Kamalnath, where the husband does not regularly turn his earnings over to his wife. So, it is not automatic that particular aspects of a strong marital relationship lead to husbands giving their wives their earnings. It also appears that the

link is moderated by the women's education. The women who managed money were all comparatively highly educated or had at least as much education as their husbands.

Upsetting the Balance

Relationship quality can also work to enhance women's agency by upsetting the traditional hierarchy in the household. Specifically, husbands who have particularly close relationships with their wives sometimes give their wives with more authority than their mothers, effectively reducing the authority that the mother-in-law has over their wives just as Basu (2006) described in the case of the fictional mothers-in-law. This dynamic happened in both Saloni and Shakuntala's households and I describe Saloni's as the example. Salokh effectively gave more authority to his wife Saloni by supporting her in disputes she had with his mother and giving Saloni, rather than his mother, the bulk of his income to manage. Saloni and her mother-in-law, Salila, do not get along. They avoid interacting with each other as much as possible within the household and have also had a few tense exchanges. While Salokh has tried to practice a policy of neutrality to some degree he has effectively supported Saloni by not stepping in on his mother's behalf and chastising Saloni for treating her mother-in-law in that way. Further, Salokh gives Saloni the bulk of his earnings and, in turn, Saloni chooses not to spend money in the way that Salila would like. Also, due to her husband's support, Saloni is largely free to spend her time as she chooses and while she does household work, she does not do it under her mother-in-law's instruction.

Negative Connections: Alcohol, Fights, and Partitions

Above I've ways in which strong relationships between young women and their husbands and in-laws may work causally to increase young women's participation in family decision-making. These mechanisms suggest ways in which the association between women's agency and relationship quality found may indeed be due to the causal effects of relationship quality as hypothesized. However, I also

found three ways in which women's agency in the household and relationship quality may be negatively related. These mechanisms highlight ways in which women's agency may decrease relationship quality, poor relationship quality can lead to an increase in women's agency, and how alcohol abuse may simultaneously contribute to higher levels of women's agency and poor relationship quality.

Above I describe how good relationship quality can facilitate women's agency by making women more comfortable asserting their preferences and encouraging family members to include them or take their preferences into account in decision-making. However, in cases where family members do not do more to include women and women still assert their preferences it may contribute to a reduction in relationship quality when these situations result in regular fights or abuse. Others have discussed this connection in terms of domestic violence as a backlash to women's agency (Koenig et al. 2003; Hindin and Adair 2002). In some cases then, higher levels of agency, as demonstrated by women's assertion of their preferences and disagreement with family members, can lead to poor relationship quality, as evidenced by a lack of peace in the household. Thus, there may also be cases where women's agency and relationship quality are negatively related and the causal direction goes in the opposite direction – from agency to relationship quality, rather than from relationship quality to agency. Monal describes a relatively minor instance where a wife's disagreement with her husband's decision can lead to a fight:

“A wife may not listen to her husband. A husband may tell his wife to do certain work when she gets home. He might tell her to talk nicely with the visitors and provide one cup of tea if possible or, if not, she should give them a chance to sit and talk. His wife may not like these things though. So they quarrel.”

Relationship quality and women's agency can also be negatively related in the longer term in extreme situations where relationship quality becomes so poor that it results in separation of a couple or family. As discussed here and in many other studies (Bloom et al. 2001; Mason 1998; Mullany et al. 2005; Mumtaz and Salway 2005; Malhotra and Mather 1997; Allendorf 2007; Balk 1997; Jejeebhoy and

Sathar 2001), family structure is a key determinant of women's agency. Women who reside in nuclear families have much more decision-making power simply because they do not have senior in-laws present. By the same token, women who live without their husband present have more decision-making power because a husband is not present to compete for decision-making power. Thus, in the long term, when relationships between family members become so strained that they cause the partition of a joint family or the breakup of a marriage they put women in living situations where they have less senior family members present and, thus, more agency. There were four cases of just such situations among the focus households.

In two cases, poor relations between younger and older generations caused the partition of joint families. Sarisha and her husband, Sarit, used to live in a joint family with her husband's parents and brothers. Sarit's mother used to drink regularly and insult her sons and daughters-in-law when she was drunk, using bad words and complaining about their work and behavior. In turn, Sarit's father beat his mother as punishment for these episodes. After two years Sarit decided he could no longer live with his parents because of this dynamic. So, he and Sarisha moved to their own home and formed a nuclear family. Similarly, Parvati and Parvesh lived for some time with Parvesh's parents and siblings in a joint family soon after they were married. However, as described elsewhere, Parvesh's family, especially his mother, were upset about their inter-caste marriage. The family fought on a daily basis and Parvesh's family treated Parvati very poorly and tried to force Parvesh to abandon Parvati. So, Parvesh and Parvati moved away from the family to Pariwarbasti and formed a household with just the two of them. After a few months they tried living again with Parvesh's family, but there were still constant fights and problems. So, Parvesh built them a new home of their own near his parents' house where he could see his family, but Parvati would be protected to some degree from constant interaction with them.

In two other cases, young women left their husbands and/or in-laws by themselves because the relations with their family members were so poor. Bina's in-laws and husband were abusive and denied her sufficient food. After some time enduring these poor relations, Bina left her husband and family to return to her natal home. As she describes, this change resulted in an immediate and substantial increase in her agency:

“Now my life is happy without a husband. I was not able to eat enough with my husband. I couldn't dress well. I was supposed to walk under him [should have done things in his control]. Now, I can do what I want. I can go wherever I wish to go. I can eat whatever I like to eat.”

Similarly, soon after her marriage, Sahila moved to Nepal with her husband, Sahaj to live with his family. She had very poor relations with both her husband and her in-laws at that time. Her in-laws disliked her because she was of a lower caste and refused to take food from her and beat her. At that time her husband drank heavily and constantly sided with his parents against Sahila, refusing to listen to her or help her. Eventually, Sahila decided she could not live like that anymore. She took her two children and returned to Pariwarbasti, where she grew up. Three weeks later her husband followed her and eventually gave up drinking as well. Sahila is still far from enjoying an ideal relationship with her husband, but their relationship is better now that they live on their own and she no longer has to suffer at the hands of her in-laws. These cases illustrate that when family relationships become unbearable, in the longer term, it can lead to an increase in women's agency if it forces women to escape the influence of those family members by living separately. Although, the availability of this option is affected by relationship quality by family members – this time with natal family members.

Women's agency and relationship quality may also be negatively related in some situations due to their connections with alcohol abuse. Alcohol abuse is a major factor in causing poor relationship quality by contributing to fights, abuse, and estrangement. At the same time, alcohol abuse can

incapacitate senior family members' ability to make household decisions. In these situations, young wives or daughters-in-law may take on more decision-making power to substitute for the senior family member's lack of participation. As Dipesh describes, "[A husband] has to be able to take charge. If the husband is a fool though and drinks alcohol and walks around in a drunken stupor then the wife has to take charge." Thus, alcohol abuse may simultaneously contribute to poor relationship quality among family members and greater agency among young women. In cases where alcohol abuse is caused by poor relationship quality, this may also be another type of case where poor relationship quality can work to increase women's agency.

III. Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the lack of ideal measures, it is clear that as hypothesized, women with higher quality family relationships do have higher levels of agency. Depending on family structure, women who visit their natal families very often and have better relations with their husbands and in-laws have greater agency. In particular, being the first one in their husband's loyalties, above and beyond their husband's parents, has the strongest effect on women's agency, suggesting that husband's influence plays a key role in women's agency. Further, as a determinant of women's agency, the quality of family relationships is comparable in its effects to other well-known determinants of agency, including education and working outside the home.

There is a clear exception however. Women's reporting of domestic violence has no association with women's agency after controlling for women's agency at the time of marriage. This null result may be due in part to the dual role that violence can play. Domestic violence is certainly an indicator of poor family relations, which, as theorized here, should lower women's agency. However, at the same time, domestic violence may be a response to women asserting their choices. If domestic violence simultaneously occurs in both directions - both working to reduce agency and punish women whose

agency oversteps the bounds approved by family members - then women's experience of domestic violence may have no association on average with agency as seen here.

While the analysis of survey data does find an association between family relationship quality and women's agency, the analysis of qualitative data provides additional evidence that the association may indeed be due to a causal link in part. Loving and close relations among family members in the marital household increase women's agency by encouraging women to assert their choices and motivating family members to consult women and take their preferences into account. Giving women greater space to make decisions is a way of expressing love. Strong affection and trust affection between spouses in particular may increase the chances that husbands give their wives income to manage and greater space to make decisions about their own mobility.

The analysis of the qualitative data, however, also point to a tangled causal web. While giving young women greater space to exercise their agency is an expression of love, young women are also more likely to love those that give them such space. Natal family members may also be more likely to maintain strong relationships with daughters or sisters that have higher levels of agency. Extremely poor relationship quality can also lead to the separation of families in the long term, which puts young women in a more senior position in their own homes and increases their agency. Alcohol abuse also can improve women's agency while harming relationship quality.

Overall, these findings do support family relationship quality as a determinant of women's agency. The strength of family bonds, especially the marital bond, plays an important role in determining women's ability to make decisions in the family. This paper, thus, suggests that the fears of Basu's "fictional mothers-in-law" are not just fictional. Women who are the recipient's of their husband's primary loyalty exercise greater power in the household, sometimes overtaking the power of

their mothers-in-law. This finding further suggests that research on marital power and marital quality should begin to take the potential for reverse causation into account. The literature on marital power and quality hypothesizes that egalitarian gender relations as demonstrated through sharing decision-making power enhances marital quality. While this may be true, it also appears that causation goes in the opposite direction as well when marital quality motivates spouses to make decisions together. Further, this examination of the quality of family relationships suggests that the focus on domestic violence in developing contexts should be broadened to encompass a more holistic approach to family relationship quality. While women certainly experience violence and abuse, they also experience love and affection and these positive aspects of relationships also affect their lives.

The findings presented here also point to room for improvement in measures of women's agency. The measures in the survey data used here, as well as other surveys, emphasize needing to ask permission of family members. So, for example in the measure in the WRHS, the options for spending are 1) without permission or informing; 2) with husband or other family members or after consultation; 3) secretly or without telling; 4) does not buy. Similarly, for mobility the options go from 1) can go without permission or after informing; 2) can go but only with someone; 3) cannot go at all. Both of these ordinal scales neglect the frequency with which women get permission, which may be an important distinction. By these measures, the woman who must always ask her husband for permission to go somewhere or buy something and is always told no is assumed to have the same level of agency as the woman who must ask her husband and is always told yes. Both of these women must ask permission. However, the first woman is consistently unable to exercise her choice to go somewhere or buy something and the second woman is able to exercise such choice.

Figure 1. Scree plot of the eigenvalues from the factor analysis of agency indicators.

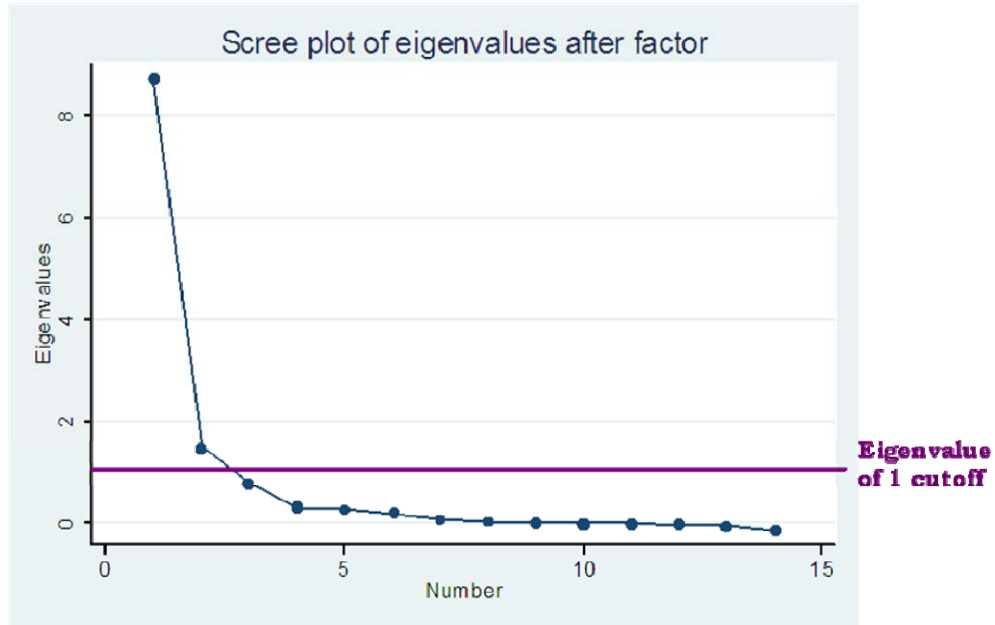


Table 1. Loadings of the agency index from the factor analysis of agency indicators.

	Agency Factor
Mobility – market	0.79
Mobility – health facility	0.85
Mobility – religious place	0.74
Mobility – relative or friend’s home	0.65
Mobility – entertainment center	0.48
Mobility – outside village or town	0.47
Spending decision – food	0.86
Spending decision – small household item	0.89
Spending decision – medicine for child	0.88
Spending decision – medicine for self	0.87
Spending decision – gift	0.88
Spending decision – sari	0.87
Spending decision – jewelry	0.83
Spending decision – large household item	0.83
Eigenvalue	8.74
Variance explained	0.62

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for variables in agency models. The percentages in parentheses are the percentages to the sample of women who do have in-laws.

	<i>2,444 Women in both nuclear and joint families %</i>	<i>1,340 Women in nuclear families %</i>	<i>1,104 Women in joint families %</i>	<i>Differs significantly between joint and nuclear families</i>
Agency factor	mn:23.9 sd:7.6	mn:25.4 sd:7.9	mn:22.1 sd:6.9	Yes
Natal family visits				
Less than once a year	19.4	19.3	19.6	Yes
At least once a year	60.7	59.0	62.7	
Every month	14.2	14.3	14.2	
Every week	5.7	7.5	3.6	
Relations with husband				
Many difficulties	1.7	1.8	1.6	No
Some difficulties	19.3	17.8	21.0	
Very few difficulties	79.0	80.4	77.5	
Husband's violence				
None	52.1	47.8	57.0	Yes
Physical violence only	26.6	27.9	25.1	
Threatened abandonment	21.3	24.3	17.9	
Comes first for husband				
Parents	15.3 (18.7)	5.9 (8.9)	26.2	Yes
Parents & respondent equally	34.5 (42.2)	20.8 (31.4)	50.4	
Respondent	32.0 (39.1)	39.4 (59.7)	23.4	
Husband has no parents	18.3 (0)	34.0 (0)	0	
Relations with in-laws				
Many difficulties	1.6 (2.0)	1.4 (2.3)	1.8	Yes
Some difficulties	21.8 (27.9)	13.2 (22.3)	31.8	
Very few difficulties	54.7 (70.1)	44.6 (75.4)	66.4	
No in-laws	21.9 (0)	40.8 (0)	0	
Household wealth factor	mn:0.0 sd:1.9	mn:-0.2 sd:1.8	mn:0.3 sd:2.0	Yes
Urban residence	23.0	24.7	21.1	No
Age				
Less than 25	28.80	19.9	39.3	Yes
25-29	28.8	26.8	31.1	
30-34	24.8	30.3	18.3	
35-39	17.7	23.1	11.4	
Education				
No schooling	56.1	61.7	49.5	Yes
Less than SLC (<10 years)	30.3	28.0	33.0	
SLC or more (10+ years)	13.6	10.3	17.5	
Works outside household	35.4	45.4	23.8	Yes
Mobility after marriage				
Too many restrictions	23.6	24.1	23.1	No
Several restrictions	26.8	27.6	25.8	
A few restrictions	34.2	31.9	36.8	
No restrictions	15.5	16.4	14.4	
Spending after marriage				
Only with permission	40.8	42.1	39.3	No
Usually with permission	22.5	21.5	23.6	
Sometimes with permission	20.6	19.2	22.3	
Without permission	16.1	17.2	14.9	

Table 3. Coefficients and standard errors from multivariate regression models of women's agency.

	Women in Nuclear Families				Women in Joint Families			
	n = 1,340				n = 1,104			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Natal family visits								
Less than once a year (ref)	0		0		0		0	
At least once a year	1.3*	(.52)	0.8	(.51)	0.6	(.39)	0.0	(.38)
Every month	0.7	(.80)	0.4	(.71)	0.4	(.63)	-0.2	(.63)
Every week	3.2**	(.88)	2.6**	(.84)	1.6	(1.1)	1.4	(.88)
Relations with husband								
Many or some difficulties (ref)	0		0		0		0	
Very few difficulties	1.2 [†]	(.64)	1.4*	(.61)	0.0	(.50)	0.8	(.51)
Comes first for husband								
Parents (ref)	0		0		0		0	
Parents & respondent equally	0.9	(.86)	0.6	(.86)	1.0*	(.45)	0.8 [†]	(.38)
Respondent	3.1**	(.82)	2.6**	(.80)	3.6**	(.75)	3.5**	(.64)
Husband has no parents	2.6*	(1.2)	2.2*	(1.1)				
Husband's violence								
None (ref)	0		0		0		0	
Physical violence only	-1.2*	(.53)	0.0	(.49)	-0.8 [†]	(.41)	0.3	(.43)
Threatened abandonment	-2.1**	(.59)	-0.5	(.62)	-1.3*	(.55)	0.9	(.54)
Relations with in-laws								
Many or some difficulties (ref)	0		0		0		0	
Very few difficulties	0.5	(.79)	1.0	(.77)	2.1**	(.48)	1.7**	(.43)
No in-laws	0.8	(1.2)	1.0	(1.2)				
Household wealth factor								
Urban residence	0.5*	(.21)	0.3	(.19)	-0.1	(.24)	0.0	(.17)
Age								
Less than 25 (ref)	0		0		0		0	
25-29	1.2*	(.54)	0.9 [†]	(.52)	1.5**	(.45)	1.3**	(.42)
30-34	1.8**	(.54)	1.4**	(.51)	3.4**	(.64)	3.4**	(.57)
35-39	1.7*	(.69)	1.6*	(.64)	4.3**	(.72)	3.9**	(.59)
Education								
No schooling (ref)	0		0		0		0	
Less than SLC (<10 years)	0.8 [†]	(.48)	0.7	(.48)	0.6	(.48)	0.8 [†]	(.41)
SLC or more (10+ years)	3.5**	(.78)	2.3**	(.78)	3.2**	(.71)	2.3*	(.58)
Works outside household	2.0**	(.49)	1.8**	(.48)	1.6**	(.47)	1.7**	(.39)
Has two or more sons	0.8 [†]	(.44)	1.2**	(.42)	0.0	(.42)	0.1	(.35)
Mobility after marriage								
Too many restrictions (ref)			0				0	
Several restrictions			0.8	(.57)			2.4**	(.44)
A few restrictions			1.9**	(.59)			2.4**	(.52)
No restrictions			2.6**	(.81)			3.1**	(.82)
Spending after marriage								
Only with permission (ref)			0				0	
Usually with permission			-0.1	(.43)			1.1*	(.47)
Sometimes with permission			2.6**	(.69)			3.6**	(.59)
Without permission			5.1**	(.76)			5.7**	(.85)
Constant	17.2**	(1.1)	14.6**	(1.2)	15.8**	(.54)	11.7**	(.48)
R ²	0.27		0.36		0.30		0.42	

[†]p<0.10 *p<0.05 **p<0.01, two tailed

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