"Intra Household Decision Making and Children Outcomes in Malawi: the Effect of Matrilineal and Patrilineal Descent"

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Long Abstract

This paper aims to analyse whether enhancing women’s decision making may increase children outcomes like health and education. In order to have an indicator of the women’s intra-household decision making we construct a specific index of bargaining power within the family in Malawi considering different decisions.

Analysing intra-household decision making in developing countries is important because the gender of the individual responsible of household finances affects the way the money is spent (Attanasio & Lechene 2002; Doss 2006; Duflo 2003; Rosero & Schady 2008) in a way that when women have more bargaining power within the family money are more likely spent on things that benefit children’s needs (Smith et al, 2003).

The literature on gender differences and women’s bargaining power has been assumed that higher female power leads to greater participation on the household decision making process (Becker, 1996). When women’s bargaining power increases, family welfare improves due to the fact that women choices are better oriented towards each member needs. So, in households where the wife has a higher bargaining power, the expenditure share of items that are positively correlated with household’s welfare, such as healthy food and education, is found to be higher than in households where women have less power (Buchmann (2000), Lam and Schoeni 1993; Smith et al, 2003).

Among developing countries, we choose Malawi. This choice is related not only to the availability of interesting datasets, that allows numerous empirical analysis, but also to its intrinsic characteristics. Malawi is often defined by both locals, visitors and tourists “The Warm Heart of Africa”. This is because Malawi friendly and welcoming spirit. Behind the optimism of its culture, Malawi is one of the poorest places on earth. Malawi in fact, is a contradictory country: on one side, with its 67% of the population under the age of 25 and 50% of the population under age of 15 (CIA World Factbook, 2017), it is a promising countries in terms of economic growth and development, on the other side, Malawi is one of the poorest country in the world, ranked 170 out of 188 countries on the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2015), with also the large number of children living in poverty. However, despite hardship, hunger, disease, lack of education and lack of opportunity, the people of Malawi remain optimistic becoming a fruitful field for implementing policies.
Moreover, Malawi has been targeted in the recent year with a lot of programme aims to improve children and adult population.

In particular, several international institutions (among the most important we find United Nations Population Fund, European Union, Action Aid, International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics, Hunger project, determined to Develop, etc...) are implementing programmes that are focused on women empowerment in Malawi: when women are supported and empowered their families are healthier, more children go to school, agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase. In short, all society benefit.

Finally, Malawi is a unique country because of its system of inheritance: around 60% of households are matrilineal and follow descent through the female line, so that land goes from mother to daughter at the time of marriage, while the remainder are patrilineal and follow descent through the male line.

In the theoretical literature, decision making power has been analysed by means of three broad categories of economic models, such as, unitary, collective and bargaining models (Becker, 1981; Lundberg & Pollak, 1993; Browning et al. 2006; Chiappori, 1988). For instance, cooperative bargaining models use a game theoretic model of the household in which bargaining power is a function of the outside options of the two individuals bargaining. The individual’s outside option is the welfare that he or she would receive if not a member of the household. The critical insight that these models offer is that policies that change the outside options of individuals will affect their bargaining power within the household and thus, affect outcomes. For example, a cash transfer program that increases women outside option would also affect their bargaining power. Moreover, bargaining power indicators often only capture women’s economic empowerment. This is problematic because not all women can benefit from their economic position in the same way. This is because benefiting from such resources may depend on social norms that constrain women’s power in other dimensions (Agarwral 1997).

Thus, the aim of this paper is twofold: first construct a specific index of bargaining power within the family in Malawi. We take into account four dimensions, namely, (1) decisions on how to use earnings, (2) decisions on how to allocate items, (3) decisions on what crops has to be planted, and finally (4) decisions on livestock. Each dimension has a different number of items, thus we aggregate them using the methodology proposed for the multi deprivation indices (see for instance Bellani 2013, Amendola et al. 2017). After constructing the index (Female Power Index, FPI), the second aim of the paper is to examine the effect of women bargaining power on children outcomes (namely schooling and health) in other words, whether the school attendance of children and the Body Mass Index (BMI) of infants increases when mothers are more likely to take decisions within the family. Moreover, we focus on the effect of the Female Power Index in the family; we distinguish between matrilineal and patrilineal
(i.e. the descent land heritage in the family) and between daughters and sons. Our hypothesis could be synthesized as follow:

• H1: Women’s decision-making power has a positive relationship with their children’s enrolment status and health;

• H2: The relationship between women’s decision-making autonomy and children’s outcomes depends on child’s gender;

• H2a: Gender and Schooling: The positive relationship between women’s autonomy and children’s enrolment is stronger for daughters because women with greater decision-making autonomy may be more capable to negotiate social and labor demands that would otherwise prevent their daughters from attending school;

• H2b: Descendent and Schooling:
  ~ if a matrilineal system implies a better outside option for the mother, the relationship between women’s autonomy and children’s enrolment is positive and stronger for daughters since it increases women’s power to favour her daughter;
  ~ if a matrilineal system brings a higher opportunity cost of the daughter’s school, it produces a negative relationship between women’s autonomy and daughter’s enrolment

• H3a: Gender and Health: There are no reasons for thinking of a stronger and positive relationship between women’s autonomy and daughter’s health;

• H3b: Descendent and Health: The positive relationship between women’s autonomy and children’s health will be stronger for daughters in a matrilineal system, to improve the health of her descendant. In patrilineal system, more female’s decision power increases the health of sons on which women’s social and financial well-being depends.

We used the data taken from the Integrated Household Panel Survey 2010-2013-2016 (Long-Term Panel) provided by the National Statistical Office of the Government of Malawi with the financial and technical support of World Bank.

Results show that the effect of the Female’s power index (FPI) is positive related to school attendance and the coefficient is higher for sons’ schooling. Secondly, matrilineal descent is negative correlated to the probability of going to school for both children. Thus, in communities where there is a matrilineal system the hypothesis that the school is an opportunity cost for the family is confirmed (H2b), it’s not the case if the system is patrilineal or mixed. If we interact the heritage variables with the Female power index, (for testing the differences when the power index increases in communities where the ethnic group is matrilineal, patrilineal or both) we can see only an advantage for daughters, produced by an increase of the power of women in matrilineal communities. Probably women with a greater decision-making autonomy may be more capable to negotiate social and labor demands that otherwise would prevent their daughters from attending school.
These results are confirmed also if we split the sample. We can see that the women power counts only in the matrilineal communities, instead, doesn't count if the communities are patrilineal. This results is compatible with the following reasons: women having an outside option are more capable to make their power effective; it should be also a cultural effect, that makes more effective the power of women in communities contest favourable to women.

Regarding health, in the specific the Body Mass Index, the effect of the Female’s power (FPI) is positive for BMI, for the total sample, with no differences between sons and daughters. If we consider the interaction, between FPI and matrilineal communities versus all the others, the coefficient of FPI shows that in no-matrilineal communities the more the women decide the higher the son’s BMI, while in matrilineal communities the FPI produces a negative effect for sons, but not significantly increases for daughters.

Considering the matrilineal sample, patrilineal and both, the estimation results show that the women power counts only in the matrilineal communities and that it has a positive effect on the health, but only for daughters; otherwise, no evidence is found if the communities are patrilineal. On the other hand, communities with both patrilineal and matrilineal, show a positive coefficient for sons. We can summarize the main results on our hypotheses in the following:

- H1 is verified: women’s decision-making power shows a positive effect on their children’s enrolment status and health.
- H2 is verified: the relationship between women’s decision-making autonomy and children’s outcomes varies by child’s gender.
- H2a is not verified: the positive relationship between women’s autonomy and children’s enrolment is NOT stronger for daughters but for sons.
- H2b is verified: the positive relationship between women’s autonomy and children’s enrolment is stronger for daughter in matrilineal system, in other words women have an outside option that strengthen their power in favour of their daughters.
- H3a is verified: There are no differences between children about the effect of women’s power and health.
- H3b is not verified: The positive relationship between women’s autonomy and children’s health is NOT stronger for daughters, however, we do find a different effect for sons in not-matrilineal communities, where the more the woman decides, the higher the sons’ BMI, while in matrilineal systems the Female Power produces a negative effect on sons’ BMI, but not significantly positive for daughters.
References
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