

Cooperative Conflicts and Gender Relations: Experimental Evidence from Southeast Uganda



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To understand gender relations and how they affect well-being in developing countries, a strong knowledge of intrahousehold relations – the bargaining between members of a household over decisions that affect them – is crucial. Using interdisciplinary research from Southeast Uganda, Cecile Jackson challenges and extends Amartya Sen's widely accepted model of intrahousehold bargaining. Developed to theorize and understand power differentials between men and women within households, Sen's cooperative conflicts model predicts that, within a given relationship, the person whose bargained outcomes conform more closely to their preferences than those of the other party:

- is more self-interested (in actuality and self-perception)
- makes the greater contribution to household income
- has a more favorable breakdown position (that is, has less to lose in case of defeat)

Questioning expectations. Jackson questions all three expectations in Sen's bargaining framework using economic games played in the predominantly Bagisu area of Uganda in 2005, where 240 participant couples contributed to, and had access to, a conjugal fund. The games were designed – with the expectations of Sen's model in mind – to understand how husbands and wives manage household funds: how much money would they keep for themselves? How much would they add to a joint pool of funds, and how would they share this common pool? The observed behavior was analyzed relative to the gender dynamics and cooperative behaviors predicted by Sen's model. (See Iversen et al. [2011] for the full formal game design with experimental results.)

An uncertain balance of power. Bagisu marriage is formally an authoritarian regime of male control. In actuality, however, the dependence of Bagisu men on their wives, and their wives' readiness to divorce and remarry, influences bargaining outcomes. Men are anxious to sustain marriage, since failure to do so has dramatic consequences and may even be fatal: bachelors and divorced men are socially ridiculed, suspected of sorcery and theft, and in extreme cases may be subject to violence. The complex interdependencies of husbands and wives in diverse ethnographies suggest a more uncertain balance of power within marriage than the cooperative

conflict model implies.

Challenging gender stereotypes of self-perceptions. The study questions Sen's emphasis on lower self-perceptions of personal welfare among women and on the role of cash contributions to the household as the basis of bargaining power, and it argues for a broader characterization of fallback positions. While Sen's model provides a useful way to think about the nature of power within households, it seems to miss some important dimensions. Degrees of self-perception of personal welfare are not neatly divided by gender; although the association of women with altruism and men with self-interest is a pervasive idea – in Western gender stereotypes, in development policy – this is clearly a complex and context-dependent matter. What is more, contributions are seen more broadly than by a money metric, power has cultural dimensions that may be very significant, and marriage is valued beyond its material worth. Divorce and remarriage possibilities affect marital power, and hence change the fallback position of each spouse, a feature that researchers using Sen's approach tend to neglect.

A complex balance of power. The cooperative conflicts model also gives inadequate recognition to male gender identities. Gisu husbands clearly need their wives' farm labor, reproductive capacities, and domestic labor to secure their livelihoods, yet wives also provide social standing: wives maintain men's gender identities, serve as character referees, and establish men's position vis-à-vis other men. Lineage politics in patrilineal and patrilocal societies exclude women from public affairs and full lineage membership. Yet the same politics depend on women to reproduce new lineage members and ensure everyday livelihoods. Thus, the character of dependence and interdependence in households reflects a complex balance of power not easily predictable using Sen's model of cooperative conflicts. As the game behavior of the Gisu couples reveals, marital power is relational and multidimensional.

Reference:

Iversen, Vegard, Cecile Jackson, Bereket Kebede, Alistair Munro, and Arjan Verschoor. 2011. "Do Spouses Realise Cooperative Gains? Experimental Evidence from Rural Uganda." *World Development* 39(4): 569–78.

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