

Household bargaining and marital practices among young Indian women

Neha Verma

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi, India
nverma.kmc@gmail.com

Abstract

Objective: The paper attempts to unravel the household bargaining power and autonomy in marital practices among young Indian women vis-à-vis their husband and older women in the household.

Statistical Analysis: The unit level Indian Human Development Survey-II (2011-12) data is used for the study. Individual and household level autonomy is assessed through attributes like decision making in the household, mobility, financial autonomy and social and political consciousness among women. However, marital practices are studied in relation to marital history and nature of marital relationship. The differences in the percentages of young and old women with respect of these attributes are tested through two group mean comparison using t-testing and significance of the difference is noted and conclusions are drawn.

Findings: The major finding of the study is the presence of gendered division of work in the household in Indian society. Women after marriage remain under the influence of older women in the household and take up more prominent role as they get older. The education level of younger women fails to increase her decision making autonomy and mobility. However, education and work independence are important in enhancing women autonomy on various other fronts. A pragmatic change in the attitude of both men and women is required for gender equality in household and in society as a whole.

Keywords: Bargaining power, Women autonomy, Marital practices, Women agency.

1. Introduction

Fundamental principle of Hindu social organization is to preserve land, women and ritual quality (caste purity) [Nur Yalman, Social Anthropologist, and Harvard University]. The control over women in the household and society thereby curtailing their autonomy and movement is at the centre of the patriarchal societies. According to Manusmriti, women are seen as highly disloyal, they look for mate after mate and can give away to any man – they have an insatiable lust. The ideology which preaches *stridharma* and *pativrata* become the mechanism to exercise control over the women. This ideology being embedded in the mindset of women since their birth makes all these preaching internalized in their socially desirable behavior [1]. Across cultures, it has been generally accepted that men hold more power as compared to women [2]. The differential power diffusion ranges from men occupying socially and economically influential roles and women being swayed in daily household tasks [3]. Over the course of time, these beliefs are challenged by women and society by large. With emancipation of women in modern times, greater participation in the labour force and educational and professional advancement in their qualifications, the traditionally defined gender roles at the individual, household and societal levels should be revisited. The gender roles are a product of age old beliefs, practices and attitudes which can only undergo a slow and gradual change. In India, there is not a clear cut division between urban emancipated modern women and rural poorly educated dependent women. In a patriarchal society like ours, the gender roles are identified with the women irrespective of their region, education and workforce participation. In the contemporary world, we focus on women's decision making power in the household, mobility, financial autonomy and marital practices to understand the phenomenon of women empowerment. Various authors have defined the term differently but the definition which fits in the line of argument of this paper is proposed by [4] who defined empowerment as "the process, and the outcome of the process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources, and challenge the ideology of patriarchy and the gender-based discrimination against women in all the institutions and structures of society". Individual empowerment includes both control over resources (extrinsic) and ideology (intrinsic) [5].

2. Related research

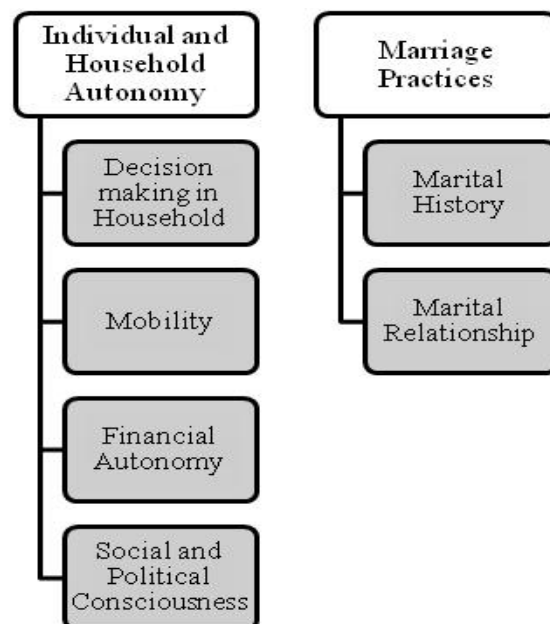
The gendered division of labour, where men function as breadwinners and women homemakers and careers in the domestic sphere, emerged during the industrialization in the second half of the 19th century [6]. It has also been proven that egalitarian gender role attitudes are associated with a more gender-egalitarian division of household chores [7] and with a higher civic participation by people [8]. The household bargaining power of women determines her role and importance in the family as well as instigates her position in the marital relationship. Women's empowerment is necessary for ensuring not just their own health and welfare but also the well-being of the entire household. They are the primary means by which social norms are transmitted to their children and thus are placed in a critical position to inculcate attitudes in favour of gender equality among their children and households. In almost every sphere of human functioning in India, the roles defined for women are subordinated to those defined for males, the rights for women are fewer or less emancipating than those of men, and women's obligations are more limiting than those of men, resulting in gender disparity at every level, cutting across all types of class and caste powerlessness [9]. From this perspective, an individual woman's empowerment could trigger the empowerment process at the household, community and societal levels and thus challenge prevailing patriarchal gender norms [5].

The paper by [5] has probed into the meaning and dimensions of women empowerment. They also looked at the spatial differences in the same. According to the authors, at the national level, 43% of the women have high household autonomy; 23% of the women have high freedom to move outside their home; 40% of the women have no gender preference for an extra child; and 43% of the women reject domestic violence. The study show that urban women are in a more favorable situation as compared to their rural counterparts. The decision making ability of women about the reproductive behavior is an important variable of marital practices and affects her health functioning. Generally, the women who were considered to be empowered were actually constrained to exercise fertility control behavior. It was hypothesized that socio-cultural influences including those of husbands, in-laws and other family members impelled women to become incapacitated [10]. The relationship between malnutrition (one of the important aspects of child health) and gender is more complex and is linked to women's empowerment and social status and their implications for nutrition outcomes in women, children and adolescents [11].

3. Research question

This paper discusses the role of young Indian women in the household and in society vis-à-vis their husbands and also in relation to older women in the household.

Figure 1. Research Setup

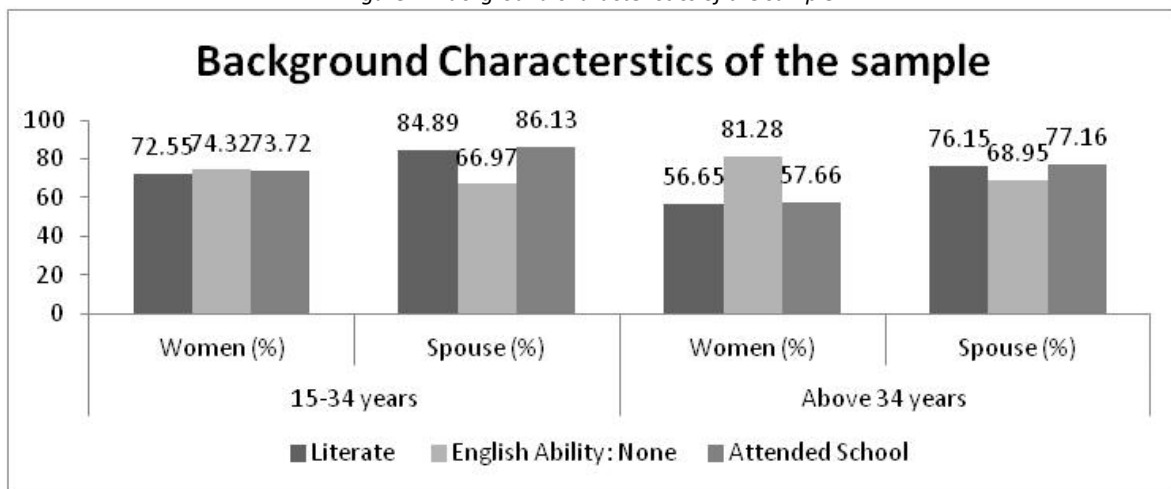


Their marital history and marital relationship are discussed in comparison to older cohorts. The Figure 1 presents the setup of the study. Under individual and household level variables, mobility, decision making power, financial autonomy and social and political consciousness are included and for studying the marriage practices, questions on marital history and marital relationship are analyzed. All the variables are categorical and the details are presented in the appendix.

4. Methodology

The paper uses the unit level data of ‘Eligible Women Survey’ of Indian Human Development Survey – II (IHDS-II) which pertains to period 2011-12. The data is categorized according to age into youth and older cohorts. The women within the age group of 15-34 years are categorized as youth and above 34 years is the category to study the older group. There are 10787 observations within the age group 15-34 years and 28736 observations are within above 34 years category. The background characteristics of the sample are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Background characteristics of the sample



The younger generation in both sexes has higher literacy and school attendance rates. However, English ability of the older group is higher than the younger group. To study the differences in the percentages of young and old women with respect of various attributes discussed in Figure 1, the two group mean comparison is done using t-testing and significance of the difference is tested and conclusions drawn.

It should be noted that difference in literacy and school attendance is statistically significant between the two groups of women, implying that while drawing conclusions about the other variables of the study; we should acknowledge that younger women in this sample are better educated than older women.

5. Data analysis

1. Individual and household autonomy

Decision making in the household: The decision making variables are discussed in Tables 1,2. The decision on what to cook primarily lies with the women irrespective of the age. However, for every other household related decision, men have the most say and the difference is not minuscule. The decision making power regarding purchases in the household (expensive item or land/ property), marriage expenses and selection of spouse for the children lie majorly with the older men in the household.

But within men and women of the younger cohorts, the husband has a way higher say in these decisions. Comparing younger and older women, the latter has a much higher say these decisions as compared to former.

Table 1. Decision making (most say) by husband and wife

Decision making	15-34 years (%)		Above 34 years (%)	
	Women	Spouse	Women	Spouse
Decides what to cook on daily basis	50.25	12.62	74.43	14.13
Decides purchasing an expensive item	3.86	54.55	13.5	74.27
Decides number of children to have	21.2	71.53	26.93	70.65
Decides what to do if wife falls sick	13.02	63.46	27.25	65.15
Decides whether to buy land/ property	2.33	48.82	10.42	75.33
Decides wedding expense	6.15	46.47	18.79	68.55
Decides what to do if child falls sick	19.19	58.94	33.1	60.88
Decides to whom children should marry	7.02	67.69	16.02	74.93

Source: Author's calculation using Indian Human Development Survey – II

Surprisingly, women have a very little say in the case they fall sick and their spouses are the decision makers regarding their health. It is noteworthy that younger women have even little say in their own health matters as compared to older women. The fertility behavior is also not in the women decision realm. The men decide the ideal number of children to have and women have a very little say in the matter. It reinforces the point that women are not just virtually absent from the decision making of the household but they are physically and reproductively oppressed. The role of mothers has been widely accepted to have a pronounced effect on the well-being of her child in terms of education, health and mortality. But this effect is again mediated by the decision making role of women in the household. As observed from the Table 1, women have a little say in what to do if the child falls sick. The result is true for both age groups.

Table 2. Decision making by women

Decision making					How attributes of older cohorts different from younger cohorts	
	Women Respondents	15- 34 years (%)	Above 34 years (%)	Percentage difference (%)		t-statistic
Decides what to cook on daily basis		85.87	95.52	11.24	33.68***	Significantly higher
Decides purchasing an expensive item		65.41	81.8	25.06	35.08***	Significantly higher
Decides number of children to have		90.98	92.87	2.08	6.21***	Significantly higher
Decides what to do if wife falls sick		78.71	88.01	11.82	23.5***	Significantly higher
Decides whether to buy land/ property		61.4	79.63	29.69	37.52***	Significantly higher
Decides wedding expense		66.35	85.51	28.88	43.53***	Significantly higher
Decides what to do if child falls sick		85.73	92.3	7.66	19.08***	Significantly higher
Decides to whom children should marry		82.79	90.1	8.83	19.16***	Significantly higher

Source: Author's calculation using Indian Human Development Survey – II

The women respondents were asked if they make decisions regarding the matters in the household (Table 2) and in all the decisions, older women have a significantly higher decision making power as compared to younger women. The percentage difference in decisions regarding expenses of the household is much higher implying that younger women in the household are not included in the money matters.

Table 3. Mobility variables responses by women

Mobility	Women ask permission to visit		t testing	
	15-34 years (%)	Above 34 years (%)	t-statistic	How attributes of older cohorts different from younger cohorts
Ask permission to visit a health centre	88.88	76.51	(-)27.79***	Significantly lower
Ask permission to visit relative/ friend home	80.22	68.38	(-)23.4***	Significantly lower
Ask permission to visit kirana shop	66.65	55.88	(-)16.07***	Significantly lower
Ask permission to go short distance by train or bus	91.97	82.91	(-)21.58***	Significantly lower

Source: Author's calculation using Indian Human Development Survey – II

Mobility: The second important factor in assessing women autonomy is mobility which includes visit to friends and family, visit to healthcare centre, visit to kirana shop and travelling a short distance by bus or train. With regard to mobility of women, both age groups' women are subjugated to seek permission before moving out of household as shown in Table 3.

However, a higher percentage of younger women have to seek permission to visit places as compared to older women. The difference is in the percentage range 11%-19%. The restricted mobility of Indian women is an indication of their limited agency and autonomy. Social and political consciousness and financial autonomy: The process of women gaining higher autonomy and bargaining power in the household and society starts from her individual capacity building. Membership of women to various self-help groups, political organizations, women groups and regular participation in meetings where political and individual consciousness could be nurtured contributes in a massive way to individual capacity building and thereby harnessing autonomy. The overall percentage of women participating in Mahila Mandal, self-help group, credit/saving group and political organizations is quite low indicating that Indian women have very low representation on community, societal and national fronts. It is observed in the data analysis in Table 4 that higher percentage of older women has significantly higher participation in societal and political platforms as compared to younger generation. Around 10% of older women reported to have attended public meeting called by village Panchayat in the last year as opposed to just 4.61% of younger women.

Table 4. Social and Political Consciousness & Financial Autonomy

Women Responses	15-34 years (%)	Above 34 years (%)	t statistic	How attributes of older cohorts different from younger cohorts
<i>Are you a member of</i>				
Mahila Mandal	3.14	6.44	12.8***	Significantly higher
Self Help Group	7.79	15.69	20.55***	Significantly higher
Credit/ Saving Group	4.24	8.1	13.38***	Significantly higher
Political Organization	0.45	0.93	4.82***	Significantly higher
Past year: Attended public meeting/ gram sabha called by village panchayat	4.61	10.03	17.2***	Significantly higher
Cash in hand for household expenditure	84.21	93.29	28.08***	Significantly higher
Name on a bank account	40.5	60.1	29.02***	Significantly higher

Source: Author's calculation using Indian Human Development Survey – II

This difference is statistically significant at 1% level of significance. Cash in hand for household expenditure and name on a bank account are taken as indicators of financial autonomy. Around 85% of young women and 93% of older group report to have cash in hand whereas only 40% of young women and 60% of old women have their name on a bank account. These differences in the financial independence of women of different age groups are statistically significant at 1% level of significance.

2. Marital practices

Marital relationship gives an indication of wife's autonomy vis-a-vis her husband and also reflects the mindset and attitude of spouse. With regard to discussions with husband on issues related to work/farm, expenditures and community/politics, there are approximately similar percentages of women in both groups who report that they refrain from such discussions. However, a significantly higher percentage of young women report to have never engaged in discussions regarding work/farm with their husbands as compared to older cohorts as presented in Table 5. It was observed that 61.74% of young women go out on family outings with their husbands who are significantly higher than that reported by older women (Table 5). With regard to the practice of purdah, a higher percentage of younger women reportedly practice it as compared to older women. Practice of purdah/ ghunghat is a stark example of women subjugation and it is still practiced in recent times by majority of women as evident from the current nationally representative sample. The decision making ability of women about the reproductive behavior is an important variable affecting her health functioning. The phenomenon of son preference is a result of age old patriarchal practices and attitudinal behavior of taking girls to be a liability. Approximately 28% of women in the survey reported to prefer son for an extra child (Table 5). This trend leads to higher fertility, lack of medical attention to female child and distorted sex ratio.

In patriarchal societies like India, social norms tacitly confer on husband the right to beat their wife. Domestic violence experienced by a woman and the extent to which it seems justified to her provides an excellent insight into the spousal relationship, woman agency and her attitudinal perceptions of herself. The NFHS-3 data (2005-06) points to a peculiar finding that 54% of the women surveyed agree that the husband is justified in beating or hitting his wife if a situation arrives so.

Table 5. Marital relationship responses by women

Women Responses: Marital Relationship			t testing	
	15-34 years (%)	Above 34 years (%)	t statistic	How attributes of older cohorts different from younger cohorts
Never discusses with husband: Work, farm	20.8	18.93	3.84***	Significantly different
Never discusses with husband: Expenditures	9.43	9.75	1.36*	Significantly higher
Never discusses with husband: Community/Politics	29.31	28.96	0.1366	Not significantly different
Go out with Husband	61.74	55.01	(-)11.98***	Significantly lower
Practice ghunghat/ purdah	67.62	54.7	(-)12.95***	Significantly lower
Sex Preference of extra child: boy	27.99	27.17		
<i>Usual in Community: Husband beats wife if</i>				
she leaves without permission	52.81	50.83	(-)3.51***	Significantly lower
he suspects extramarital relations	85.43	83.89	(-)3.73***	Significantly lower
natal family neglects expected dowry	32.04	32.77	1.38*	Significantly higher
she neglects house or child	40.44	43.21	4.96***	Significantly higher
she does not respect elders	46.44	47.94	2.65***	Significantly higher
she doesn't cook properly	30.95	32.38	2.71***	Significantly higher

Source: Author's calculation using Indian Human Development Survey – II

The problem is even deeper. For all the reasons listed in the survey for hitting the wife, percentage of women who agree with beating is higher than that of percentage of male who agree for the same. The reason could be the deeply embedded male superiority in the mindset of Indian women and which holds them from taking charge of their agency. The IHDS data does not inform about the domestic violence experienced by women in the household. On the contrary, it tabulates the community beliefs among women interviewed. Using IHDS-II dataset, the difference in the community beliefs of younger and older women regarding domestic violence is analyzed in Table 5. More than 50% and more than eighty percent of women believe that it is usual in their community for husband to beat his wife in case of she left without permission or if he suspects extramarital affair respectively. However, the percentage of young women who believe so is significantly higher than older women. In case the natal family neglects expected dowry, the women neglects the house or child, does not respect the elders or does not cook properly, a higher percentage of older cohorts have a community belief of domestic violence as compared to younger women. Though the younger women group has higher literacy and school attendance rate in the sample but their ideology of male superiority and women subordination does not seem to vanish with educational attainment.

Marital History: Studying the marital history of two groups provides insight in their experiences as noted in Table 6. Approximately 65% of women in both age groups reported to have met their husband on the wedding/gauna day itself. Only 4.42% of women in older group reported to have chosen their husbands themselves as opposed to 6.5% of younger cohorts. However, they say in choosing the husband is significantly higher for younger women as compared to women above 34 years of age.

Table 6. Marital history responses by women

Marital History			t statistic
	15-34 years (%)	Above 34 years (%)	
<i>How long knew husband before marriage</i>			
on wedding/gauna day	64.49	65.76	
<i>Who chose your husband</i>			
Respondent herself	6.49	4.42	
Parents/ other Relatives	71.21	73.64	
Say in choosing the husband	48.66	39.46	(-)14.01***

Source: Author's calculation using Indian Human Development Survey – II

6. Appendix

Variables	Decision making by women	Responses
GR1G	Decides what to cook on daily basis	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR2G	Decides purchasing an expensive item	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR3G	Decides number of children to have	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR4G	Decides what to do if wife falls sick	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR5G	Decides whether to buy land/ property	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR6G	Decides wedding expense	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR7G	Decides what to do if child falls sick	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR8G	Decides to whom children should marry	Yes = 1, No = 0
	Mobility	
GR9A	Ask permission to visit health centre	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR10A	Ask permission to visit relative/ friend home	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR11A	Ask permission to visit kirana shop	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR12A	Ask permission to go short distance by train or bus	Yes = 1, No = 0
	Marital Relationship	
GR29A	Never discusses with husband: Work, farm	Never = 0, Sometimes = 1, Often = 2
GR29B	Never discusses with husband: Expenditures	Never = 0, Sometimes = 1, Often = 2
GR29C	Never discusses with husband: Community/Politics	Never = 0, Sometimes = 1, Often = 2
	<i>Usual in Community: Husband beats wife if</i>	
GR34	she leaves without permission	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR35	he suspects extramarital relations	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR36	natal family neglects expected dowry	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR37	she neglects house or child	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR38	she does not respect elders	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR39	she doesn't cook properly	Yes = 1, No = 0
	Social and political consciousness & Financial Autonomy	
	<i>Are you a member of</i>	
GR18A	MahilaMandal	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR18B	Self Help Group	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR18C	Credit/ Saving Group	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR18D	Political Organization	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR19	Past year: Attended public meeting/ gram sabha called by village panchayat	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR21	Practice ghunghat/ purdah	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR26	Cash in hand for household expenditure	Yes = 1, No = 0
GR27B	Name on a bank account	Yes = 1, No = 0
FP5C	Sex Preference of extra child: boy	Boy = 1, Girl = 2, No preference = 3
GR22	Go out with Husband	Yes = 1, No = 0
	Marital History	
	<i>How long knew husband before marriage</i>	
MH3	on wedding/gauna day	Yes = 1, No = 0
MH4A	<i>Who chose your husband</i>	
	Respondent herself	
	Parents/ other Relatives	
MH4B	Say in choosing the husband	Yes = 1, No = 0

7. Conclusion

Based on the data analysis presented in the last section, there appears a strict gendered perspective towards various roles in the household and in the society at large. Moreover, It shows that women after their marriage remain under the influence of older women in the household who withhold the decision making power. As the woman grows old, she takes up a more prominent role in the family. Even though age is a biological phenomenon but Indian women gains social, economic and marital advantages as she grows older. In the present sample, younger women are having higher literacy and school attendance rates as compared to older cohorts but that fails to increase their autonomy.

The grooming of Indian youth has to emanate from the change in attitude towards women. This change is required not only in men but also in women as we observe stark differences in the social participation and bargaining power of the young and old women. Along with change in attitude, a safe environment for free mobility of women is required in the country. The differential valuation of men and women work emanates from the differential investment done in the education and skill attainment of girls and boys. Therefore, an egalitarian attitude towards gender in a mother can enhance the decision to provide the household resources to children without any gender discrimination. Moreover, it is observed that education and work give an upper hand to woman in decision making and autonomy in choosing her husband, and engaging in discussions with husband. Education remains the key to enhance women autonomy on various fronts.

The social and political bodies like Mahila Mandal, self-help groups, political parties etc should have proportionate filling of seats according to age groups so that younger women are groomed too. Women participation in these groups has to increase in totality. The government should constitute bodies that educate women about their rights and shift their attitudinal behavior to tackle domestic violence rather than seeing it justified. Moreover, severe punishment laws are to be put in practice to tackle domestic violence. Lastly, the age old practice of subjecting women to men subordination is still prevalent in direct and indirect measures. Curtailing her voice and opinion in the society is a prime example of patriarchal ideology which needs to be checked.

8. References

1. U. Chakravarti. Gendering caste through a feminist lens. Phil papers Print. 2003.
2. P. Glick, M. Lameiras, S.T. Fiske, T. Eckes, B. Masser. Bad but bold: Ambivalent attitudes towards men predict gender inequality in 16 nations. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*. 2004; 86(5), 713-728.
3. S.A. Goodwin, S.T. Fiske. Power and gender: The double-edged sword of ambivalence. *Handbook of the psychology of women and gender*, Ed. R.K. Unger. New York, US: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2001; 358-366.
4. S. Batliwala. Defining women's empowerment: a conceptual framework, education for women's empowerment. In *ASPBAE Position Paper for the Fourth World Conference on Women*, Beijing. 1995.
5. K. Gupta, P.P. Yesudian. Evidence of women's empowerment in India: a study of socio-spatial disparities. *Geo Journal*. 2006; 65(4), 365-380.
6. M. Valentova. Age and sex differences in gender role attitudes in Luxembourg between 1999 and 2008. *Work, Employment & Society*. 2013; 27(4), 639-657.
7. B.A. Shelton, D. John. The division of household labour. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 1996; 22, 299-322.
8. P. Norris, R. Inglehart. Gendering social capital: bowling in women's leagues? *Gender and Social Capital Conference*, St. John's College, University of Manitoba. 2003; 1-27.
9. A. Malhotra, S.R. Schuler, C. Boender. Measuring women's empowerment as a Variable in International Development. *World Bank Workshop on Poverty and Gender: New Perspectives*. 2002; 1-59.
10. S.M. Ali, M. Sultan. Socio-cultural constraints and women's decision-making power regarding reproductive behavior. *The Pakistan Development Review*. 1999; 38(4), 689-696.
11. K. Sethuraman, N. Duvvury. The nexus of gender discrimination and malnutrition: an introduction. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 2007; 42(44), 49-53.
12. National Family and Health Survey (NFHS-3). Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in India. 2009; 1-138.

The Publication fee is defrayed by Indian Society for Education and Environment (www.iseeadyar.org)

Cite this article as:

Neha Verma. Household bargaining and marital practices among young Indian women. *Indian Journal of Economics and Development*. Vol 6 (9), September 2018.