

# Women agency in India: what really matters?

NehaVerma, Madhur Ajmani Sethi, Dr. Seema Mehra Parihar

*Department of Geography, Department of Geography  
Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi*

nverma.kmc@gmail.com, 19.madhur@gmail.com, smparihar@gmail.com

## Abstract

**Objective:** The study seeks to discuss the factors affecting the agency of Indian married women within the household, using unit level Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS) – II data (2011-12). There are individual and societal level factors that favourably or unfavourably affect women's autonomy. The effects of age at the time of *gauna*, gender composition of children, *purdah* system, caste, religion, type of residence and exogamy on women autonomy are assessed after controlling for education level, wealth status, employment status and literacy status of parents, husband and in-laws.

**Statistical Analysis:** Ordinal logistic regression technique has been used to study the impact on decision making ability in the household and mobility of women.

**Findings/Application:** The results point to the significant differences among religious groups, however, the caste groups do not reveal any significant differences with respect to women autonomy. Education and employment status turn out to be favourable factors for women agency though education level fails to make significant impact on the bargaining power of women in the household.

**Keywords:** Women Agency, Bargaining power, Mobility of Women, Autonomy

## 1. Introduction

The issue of women empowerment and equality has always been on the agenda of the Government of India for policy making. In definition terms, gender equality means equal treatment of men and women however; empowerment refers to increasing the economic, political, social, educational and spiritual strength of an entity. This distinction sets the stage for this study which argues that mere ensuring gender equality, measured by the entitlements or resources, cannot guarantee women empowerment in the society. The process of empowerment has to begin in a woman's individual consciousness and later has to be externalized through greater autonomy, physical mobility, remunerated labor, and a strong role in the household. Here comes into play the phenomenal work on the subject by Amartya Sen called the Sen's Capability Approach. This approach shifts the conceptual terrain from resources and opportunities as ends to themselves, to focus on the substantive freedom people have to convert resources into "valued doings and beings" [1].

Take for example; equally entitled women in rural and urban regions may have differential freedom in movement, or differential control over the household decisions etc. These differences may emanate from various factors ranging from individual constraints like domestic violence, early marriage, domestic duties in the household to societal differences like caste, religion or as in the said example, type of residence (rural or urban). These factors which are constraining the conversion of woman's resources or entitlements into functioning or value are the crux of capability approach and are said to influence the 'agency' of women. Agency encompasses the ability to formulate strategic choices, to gain autonomy, and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes [2].

Recent empirical work has brought out very clearly how the relative respect and regard for women's wellbeing or empowerment is strongly influenced by such variables as women's ability to earn an independent income, to find employment outside home, to have ownership rights, and to have literacy and be educated participants in decisions within and outside the family [3]. Now the question arises that does gender equality in terms of the so-called equal distribution of resources or entitlements as that of men be termed as women empowerment. There is a mediating factor here between equality and empowerment, in the form of 'agency' of women which determines if these resources can be realized to their potential.

This study makes an attempt to address this question, emphasizing the role of agency or the absence of same as a contributing factor to women empowerment in India. The study categorizes the women's freedom-constraining factors into societal or individual levels. Furthermore, the probe is to ascertain which of the two levels of factors reduce the agency of women to a larger extent.

Figure 1. Role of women agency



## 2. Modeling women agency

Women Agency is presumed to be dependent on societal factors; education level and health of women. Caste, religion, location and type of residence are the major societal impact factors being studied for assessing women agency. These factors form an obstacle for conversion of women's capability into functioning or achievement. For example, being a girl/woman living in rural areas as well as belonging to the SC/ST community ensure that she is triply crippled. The motivations and freedoms of choice are mediated through institutions of caste and religion. It restricts the freedom, more so of women and makes them place a low value on education (achievements) [1] as shown in Figure 1.

The role of education of women has been widely accepted to have a pronounced effect on her own well-being and the well-being of her child in terms of education, health and mortality. But this effect is again mediated by the role of agency of women. Mother's education among all the women's agency variables affects most the child nutritional status. Mother's education possibly matters for child well-being through the channel of better knowledge about improves maternal and child care practices [4].

A source of simultaneity is observed involving decision making ability of a woman and her health functioning. Do women who make more decisions achieve better health or women with better health have a higher decision making power [5]. The author, using the Demographics and Health Surveys for Ethiopia, models health functioning of women as dependent variable and attempt to gauge into its significant predictors. The decision making variables and education have an independent positive statistically significant relationship with health functioning. The role of agency is again emphasized. The decision making ability of women about the reproductive behavior is an important variable affecting her health functioning. Generally, the women who were considered to be empowered were actually constrained to exercise fertility control behaviour. It was hypothesized that socio-cultural influences including those of husbands, in-laws and other family members impelled women to become incapacitated [6].

## 3. The research setup

There are variety of studies that explain agency, empowerment, and their impact on women health, child health and nation's poverty. The present study is, however unique for it probes into the possible factors affecting women agency itself. This study posits a framework to identify the conversion factors at play for inhibiting women's agency and then measuring the relative strength of these conversion factors. There are three broad categories to be understood: resources (entitlements, attainments and opportunities) of women, conversion factors which help women transform her resources/ entitlements into value and the measured values of these attainments which can be termed as achievements. The Table 1 presents the factors included in the three categories stated.

The ‘Resources’ or the entitlements of women have been divided into two broad categories: individual and household. The individual characteristics of women are schooling, media exposure and employment level. The household factors like wealth status, education of parents, husband and in-laws also add to the resources of a woman. The number of brothers and sisters is considered important while assessing the allocation of resources to the woman in the household.

The ‘Conversion factors’ are the main agency related factors, which actually allow the woman to transform her resources into achievements. A conversion factor could be ‘favourable’ if it allows the woman to convert resources into achievements; while if these factors are ‘unfavourable’, for example early age at the time of marriage etc; then they can act as impediment in the conversion of capability. They have been divided into two categories: individual and societal. The idea behind this categorization is to enable the researcher to look at the comparative strength of individual and societal factors in affecting women agency and such assessment will be consequential for policy decision making by emphasizing where the real problem of agency is more important.

*Table 1. The linkages of women agency*

Resources	Conversion factors	Achievements
Individual Characteristics	At Individual Level	Decision making ability
Schooling	Age	Mobility
Media Exposure	Age at the time of Gauna	Freedom of sexual behavior
Employment	Age at the time of first child	Domestic Violence
Household Characteristics	Domestic duties	Job for cash
Education of Parents	Number of Children	Owning a bank account
Education of Husband and his parents	Gender Composition of Children	
Gender Composition of Siblings	Cultural Norms	
Wealth Quintile	At Societal Level	
	Caste	
	Exogamy	
	Religion	
	Type of residence	

The category ‘Achievements’ includes the by-product of interaction between resources and conversion factors. Resources do not directly translate into expected achievements and hence, equally entitled women may have differing achievements because of the conversion factors which individually affect each woman in a different manner.

#### 4. Researchquestion

The study attempts to study the impact of conversion factors (both individual and societal) on achievements of Indian married women after controlling for the resources using IHDS-II dataset. Out of the various achievement criterions, we seek to probe into decision making and mobility variables only as these two variables have been widely conceived as most important in determining autonomy of women within the household.

Ordinal logit modeling is adopted for the present study. The decision making ability of the woman is presented as an ordinal outcome variable which takes the value on the scale of 0 to 8, higher value depicting higher decision making ability. Similarly, mobility is an ordinal outcome variable on the scale of 0 to 7, higher value associated with higher mobility. Appendix explains the construction of two outcome variables. The ordinal variables are separately regressed on the conversion factors after controlling for the resources under the constraints of data. Some of the variables like media exposure, domestic duties and age at the time of first child are dropped from the regression analysis because of no direct availability of the variables in the dataset.

## 1. Women autonomy and Agency

The ordinal regression results for decision making and mobility of women, in terms of odds ratio, are presented in Tables 2 and 3 respectively. There is no evidence of multicollinearity among the explanatory variables. The control variables have been added one by one in the subsequent models to note their effect on the individual and societal conversion factors. Both individual and societal conversion factors play a prominent role in explaining the household decision making power and mobility of Indian married women. Higher age at the time of *gauna* has, as expected, increased the odds of decision making and mobility autonomy of women. Non practice of *purdah* system increases the odds of decision making power of the woman by 1.64 times as opposed to women following *purdah* system, keeping other variables constant, in Model 1 (Table 2). The effect of *purdah* system on decision making moderates with inclusion of controls, lowering from 1.64 times to 1.44 times. The number of sons and daughters do significantly increase the odds among all models for decision making and mobility; however, there is no stark difference between the coefficients for sons and daughters. This implies that gender composition of children doesn't matter as expected under the norm of son preference.

In comparison to General category, women of all the other castes have higher odds of decision making ability (Table 2). The Scheduled Tribe women have 1.33 times higher decision making autonomy, while the odds for OBC and SC women are 1.10 and 1.06 times higher as compared to general category women respectively. The effect gets moderated with inclusion of employment in (Table 2) and consequently the caste categories become insignificant in further models. The caste category 'Others' turns out to be significant with consideration of employment and literacy status of parents, husband and in-laws. The Other caste's women have 0.3 times lower decision making autonomy as compared to General category women. With respect to mobility of women, all castes other than General category show a lower odds ratio in (Table 3) and all categories become insignificant in explaining women's mobility in further models.

The practice of exogamy has significant effect on mobility of women. It significantly reduces the odds of higher mobility by around 0.15 times as opposed to women who are married within their village. The phenomenon doesn't have significant effect on household decision making power of the women. Religious groups show significant divergences for both household decision making and mobility of women from the reference category of Hindus. For household decision making, the effects of religious groups are significant across all models. Muslim women have 0.34 times lower odds in decision making ability than Hindus while other religious groups have corresponding figure as 0.38 times lower (Table 2). The coefficients for Muslims and Other religions are significant across all the models for mobility variable as well. Muslim women show a 0.34 times lower odds for mobility autonomy as compared to Hindu women, however, the women of Other religions have 1.36 times higher odds than Hindus (Table 3).

Table 2. Decision making autonomy ordinal logit regression, odds ratio

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Age at the time of Gauna	1.008**	1.01**	1.025***	1.025***	1.025***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Number of Sons	1.082***	1.084***	1.031*	1.03*	1.034*
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Number of Daughters	1.067***	1.069***	1.024	1.024*	1.025*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.015)
No purdah	1.641***	1.644***	1.479***	1.439***	1.448***
	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.061)
Other Backward Castes	1.102***	1.1001***	1.095	1.084	1.076
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.062)	(0.062)	(0.061)
Scheduled Caste	1.064*	1.063*	1.003	0.978	0.964
	(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.062)	(0.062)	(0.061)
Scheduled Tribe	1.336***	1.341***	1.057	1.038	1.015
	(0.064)	(0.065)	(0.078)	(0.078)	(0.076)

Other Castes	1.102	1.102	0.692**	0.698**	0.704**
	(0.115)	(0.0115)	(0.118)	(0.122)	(0.123)
Exogamy practised	1.084***	1.082**	1.021	1.015	1.013
	(0.041)	(0.041)	(0.063)	(0.063)	(0.063)
Muslims	0.812***	0.812***	0.782***	0.765***	0.764***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.058)	(0.057)	(0.057)
Other Religions	0.663***	0.659***	0.715***	0.723***	0.726***
	0.031)	(0.031)	(0.057)	(0.058)	(0.058)
Residence: Urban	1.155***	1.159***	1.075	1.095*	1.114**
	(0.029)	(0.03)	(0.052)	(0.053)	(0.055)
Education upto primary		1.129***	1.134**	1.167***	1.167***
		(0.039)	(0.063)	(0.068)	(0.068)
Education upto secondary		1.044	1.034	1.075	1.083
		(0.032)	(0.055)	(0.064)	(0.064)
Education upto senior secondary		0.936	0.885	0.953	0.974
		(0.048)	(0.088)	(0.102)	(0.104)
Education upto bachelors		1.018	0.884	0.962	1.011
		(0.064)	(0.098)	(0.116)	(0.123)
Education upto above bachelors		0.931	0.745**	0.822	0.892
		(0.087)	(0.102)	(0.12)	(0.133)
Employed			1.227***	1.208***	1.207***
			(0.048)	(0.047)	(0.047)
Mother Literate				1.117	1.121*
				(0.07)	(0.077)
Father Literate				0.963	0.963
				(0.048)	(0.048)
Husband Literate				1.003	1.009
				(0.047)	(0.048)
Mother-in-law Literate				0.975	0.984
				(0.071)	(0.071)
Father-in-law Literate				0.813***	0.816***
				(0.04)	(0.041)
COTOTAL					0.999***
					0.00
Number of Observations	31056	31054	12567	12450	12443

Source: Tabulation by the authors using unit level IHDS II (2011-12) survey data  
 Note: Standard errors in parentheses; \*\*\* Significant at 1% \*\* Significant at 5% \* Significant at 10%

The women autonomy (both decision making and mobility) seems to be higher if the type of residence is urban; however, the effect gets moderated with inclusion of controls in subsequent models. The women in urban areas have 1.11 times higher odds for increased decision making autonomy and 1.35 times higher odds for mobility as compared to those living in rural area. Surprisingly, the education level of women is not of much significance in determining her decision making ability in the household. Out of the five levels of education in comparison to no education, only the category of education 'upto primary' shows a significant coefficient with 1.16 times higher odds for decision making autonomy (Table 2). The Education level of women plays a significant role in determining her mobility autonomy. Increasing education level is matched with increasing mobility.

In comparison to no education, women with 'upto primary' education have 1.18 times higher odds, women with 'upto secondary' education have 1.40 times higher odds, 'upto senior secondary' category has 2.55 times higher odds, 'upto bachelors' category has 4.40 times higher odds and 'upto above bachelors' have 5.25 times higher odds for mobility autonomy (Table 3). Employed status has a positive impact on women's autonomy with odds of decision making autonomy increasing 1.20 times and mobility autonomy increasing 1.13 times in comparison to women who are not employed (Table 2 & 3). Parents' literacy enhances the mobility autonomy of women significantly (Table 2); however, only mother's education is significantly explanatory of daughter's decision making ability. The husband's literacy level has no significant impact on women's autonomy. Father-in-law's literate status reduces the odds of household decision making autonomy of women significantly (0.19 times lower than if father-in-law is not literate). The total household consumption expenditure does not alter the decision making and mobility autonomy of women as its odds ratio is close to one in both the cases (Table 2 and 3).

Table 3. Mobility autonomy ordinal logit regression, odds ratio

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Age at the time of <i>Gauna</i>	1.027***	1.004	1.002	1.0006	1.0008
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Number of Sons	1.092***	1.139***	1.12***	1.123***	1.118***
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Number of Daughters	1.075***	1.109***	1.091***	1.094***	1.093***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)
No <i>purdah</i>	1.191***	1.17***	0.965	0.981	0.972
	(0.032)	(0.031)	(0.037)	(0.039)	(0.038)
Other Backward Castes	0.808***	0.864***	0.918	0.924	0.938
	(0.026)	(0.028)	(0.054)	(0.055)	(0.056)
Scheduled Caste	0.817***	0.909**	0.961	1.003	1.03
	(0.03)	(0.034)	(0.061)	(0.064)	(0.066)
Scheduled Tribe	0.703***	0.804***	0.806***	0.853**	0.892
	(0.031)	(0.036)	(0.056)	(0.06)	(0.063)
Other Castes	0.664***	0.668***	0.829	0.926	0.911
	(0.075)	(0.075)	(0.15)	(0.173)	(0.17)
Exogamy practised	0.859***	0.857***	0.84***	0.842***	0.838***
	(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.052)	(0.053)	(0.052)
Muslims	0.632***	0.662***	0.75***	0.762***	0.763***
	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.061)	(0.063)	(0.063)
Other Religions	1.221***	1.196***	1.389***	1.384***	1.369***
	(0.065)	(0.064)	(0.113)	(0.114)	(0.113)
Residence: Urban	2.388***	2.191***	1.426***	1.395***	1.356**
	(0.169)	(0.155)	(0.162)	(0.16)	(0.156)
Education upto primary		1.238***	1.262***	1.177***	1.181***
		(0.043)	(0.063)	(0.062)	(0.062)
Education upto secondary		1.467***	1.619***	1.423***	1.407***
		(0.047)	(0.083)	(0.081)	(0.08)
Education upto senior secondary		2.128***	3.269***	2.618***	2.55***
		(0.135)	(0.367)	(0.313)	(0.305)
Education upto bachelors		3.174***	6.11***	4.702***	4.401***
		(0.318)	(1.02)	(0.825)	(0.772)

Education upto above bachelors		4.871***	8.061***	5.996***	5.25***
		(0.862)	(1.922)	(1.46)	(1.285)
Employed			1.118***	1.135***	1.137***
			(0.042)	(0.043)	(0.043)
Mother Literate				1.251***	1.24***
				(0.089)	(0.089)
Father Literate				1.314***	1.314***
				(0.064)	(0.064)
Husband Literate				1.001	0.992
				(0.042)	(0.042)
Mother-in-law Literate				0.886	0.878
				(0.072)	(0.072)
Father-in-law Literate				1.035	1.033
				(0.051)	(0.051)
COTOTAL					1***
					(0.00)
Number of Observations	20910	20909	9807	9726	9726

Source: Tabulation by the authors using unit level IHDS II (2011-12) survey data

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; \*\*\* Significant at 1% \*\* Significant at 5% \* Significant at 10%

## 5. Discussion & Concluding remarks

There are various interesting facts emerging from the data analysis which are indicative of required policy actions and prospective future studies. Social stratification in terms of religious groups shows much significant differences as compared to caste groups. In other words, the extent of women autonomy is similar across caste groups but not religious groups. Religious norms and culture practices are more rigid as compared to the caste norms. Caste and gender are inextricably linked; they interact with and shape each other. Caste system has its very foundation on principles and structure of marriage, sexuality and reproduction, the phenomenon closed linked to the extent of women subordination in the caste group. For upward caste mobility, lower castes adopted new norms for the gender practices pertaining to upper caste like restricting mobility of women, controlling their sexuality etc. This practice can shed light on why women autonomy is not significantly different across caste groups. Religious norms are not subject to such mobility attempts; therefore, the religion based divergence persists. For both the variables, decision making and mobility, Muslim women are constricted in comparison to other groups. Thus, policy initiatives should be target based towards the community. Education level of woman fails to influence the household decision making ability. This finding reinforces the point that mere obtaining resources (like education) cannot enhance women agency. Even well educated women fail to maintain the balance of power in the household. The factors like early marriage age, practice of *purdah* system, unemployed status and above all the patriarchal mindset in the household overshadow the positive effect of education.

The practice of exogamy has been restricting women mobility by refraining her from her social network of family and friends. Recent news reports have revealed that such practice is becoming a roadblock for finding suitable brides and defying the norm by the couples is often extended as reasoning for honour killings in some cases. With respect to our study, this factor presents the importance of social network in enhancing women autonomy. The negative impact of male literacy on woman's decision making power in the household is worth investigating. It implies that the impact of literacy is gender specific as educating a mother is increasing the decision making power of the daughter whereas in the case of father-in-law's literate status, her proportionate share in household bargaining is decreasing. The policy perspective is that mere focusing on increasing male adult literacy may not be sufficient in itself and there is a complementary need to change the patriarchal mindset among males.

Increase in the number of male and female children is increasing the decision making and mobility autonomy of women. In light of the son preference norm in the patriarchal culture of India, it was expected that having more sons will increase the autonomy and bargaining power of woman significantly. However, the present results point to the possibility of equality among two genders within the household in terms of enhancing mother's autonomy. This could be in light of the government initiatives to promote girl education and prohibit female foeticide. However, it should not imply that having more and more children is beneficial. The data is heavily concentrated among 1-3 children per gender. The study points to both favourable and unfavourable conversion factors for women agency. The favourable conversion factors like increasing the age at the time of marriage, non-practice of *purdah* etc as well as enhancement of women resources like education and employment should be targeted specifically for groups like Muslims, Other religions and Other Castes. The prime limitation of the current study is in terms of the variables dropped from the statistical analysis because of unavailability of them in the dataset. Moreover, a qualitative analysis involving case study method, primary survey etc can substantially augment the credibility of the model. The future study can involve understanding the explanatory factors for phenomenon like domestic violence and freedom of sexual behavior which are also imperative to women autonomy.

#### Appendix: Explaining the variables

Decision Making Ordinal Outcome Variable	Based on decisions of whether to buy an expensive item; how many children to have; what to do if fall sick; whether to buy land or property; what amount to spend on social functions like marriage; what to do if child falls sick; to whom a children should marry and discuss with husband how to spend the money. Each question has No (0) or Yes (1) as a response. Adding the response to the said questions for a particular woman gives a scale of her decision making autonomy in household. The variable is on the scale of 0 to 8.
Mobility Autonomy Ordinal Outcome Variable	Based on mobility decisions: whether she can visit health Centre alone; can visit home/ friends and family alone; can go to a kirana shop alone; Can go alone to a short distance by bus or train; visited metro city in past five years; visited town/city (rural) and visited another state. Each question has No (0) or Yes (1) as a response. Adding the response to the said questions for a particular woman gives a scale of her mobility autonomy. The variable is on the scale of 0 to 7.
Education	Qualitative variable: Divided into 6 categories- None; upto primary education; upto secondary education; upto higher secondary education; upto bachelors & upto above bachelors.
Employment	Qualitative variable: Divided into two categories- employed and unemployed
Parents' Literacy	Mother's literacy and father's literacy are coded as dummy variables: literate or not.
Spouse education	Dummy variable with two categories- husband is literate or not.
Mother-in-law & Father-in-law education	Dummy variable which is 1 if mother-in law (father-in-law) is literate and 0 if not.
Caste	Dummy variable with 5 categories (General category including Brahmins, OBC, SC, ST, Others)
Religion	Qualitative variable: divided into three categories- Hindus; Musim; Others- including Christians, Sikhs, Buddhist, Jain, Tribal
Exogamy	A social arrangement where marriage is allowed only outside a social group; Coded as a dummy variable: exogamy practiced or not.
Age	Dropped from final regression because of high correlation with age at the time of <i>gauna</i> .
Age at the time of <i>gauna</i>	Age at which women moved into husband's home and started staying with him( <i>gauna</i> )
Number of male children	number of male children a woman has
Number of female children	number of female children a woman has
<i>Purdah</i>	Represents cultural norms ; dummy variable with two categories – practice of the <i>purdah</i> system or not
Type of residence	Two categories: Rural or Urban
COTOTAL	Total household consumption expenditure (in rupees)

## 6. References

1. Jeemol U. Gender differentials in education: exploring the capabilities approach. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 2009; 44(9), 111-117.
2. K. Gupta, Y.P. Princy. Evidence of women's empowerment in India: a study of socio-spatial disparities. *Geo-Journal*. 2006; 65(4), 365-380.
3. S. Amartya. *The argumentative Indian, USA*: Penguin Books. 2006.
4. S. Begum, Binayak S. Maternal health, child well-being and chronic poverty: does women's agency matters? *The Bangladesh Development Studies*. 2009; 32(4), 69-93.
5. Ramzi M. Capability and health functioning in Ethiopian households. *Social Indicators Research*. 2011; 101(3), 359-389.
6. S.M. Ali, S. Mehboob. Socio-cultural constraints and women's decision-making power regarding reproductive behaviour. *The Pakistan Development Review*. 1999; 38(4), 689-696.

The Publication fee is defrayed by Indian Society for Education and Environment ([www.iseeadyar.org](http://www.iseeadyar.org))

[Cite this article as:](#)

Neha Verma , Madhur Ajmani Sethi, Dr. Seema Mehra Parihar. Women agency in India: what really matters? *Indian Journal of Economics and Development*. April 2019, Vol 7 (4), 1-8.

Received on: 11/03/2019

Accepted on: 11/04/2019