

Regional Disparities in Women Autonomy: An Indian Perspective

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Abstract

This purpose of the study is to explore the level of women's autonomy at various dimensions in different regional settings i.e. metro cities, cities other than metros and rural area (villages) in India, and investigates the extent to which women have freedom to participate in economic decision making in family, mobility, access to and control over economic resources, and freedom from threats of husband. The study reveals that in overall degree of women autonomy in India is low and further a wide gap has been found in stated regional settings. In metro cities women autonomy is higher than other cities & villages because of education, awareness of legal empowerment etc. whereas rural areas (villages) are at lowest place in this regard due to illiteracy, social system, conservative traditions and customs etc. A regional disunion is seen evidently, net of individual and domiciliary features, in the impact of nearly each facet of women's' autonomy.

Key Words: Women Autonomy, Regional Settings, Urban Areas, Rural Areas.

Introduction

The cultures of India are largely gender stratified, characterized by particular distinct, patrilineal residence, inheritance and succession practices that exclude the women and hierarchical relations in which the patriarch or his relatives have authority over family members. Level and pattern of women autonomy differ substantially within the region i.e. rural and urban. It has been cited that rural women have less autonomy and control over their own lives than do women in urban. Various studies have been made in this regard and most of them stated that same evidenced by two arguments. As per first argument, in rural areas due to strong belief of the people conservative traditions and customs, women occupy a separate and distinct position that strongly denies the education and freedom. Second argument supports the autonomy of urban women because of literacy, legal empowerment and supportive social system etc. And points out that urban woman have more exposure to the outside world, more voice in family life and more freedom of movement than rural women. But present scenario has been changed in which previous studies might not be taken as appropriate interpretation of present situation that initiated the researcher to make a study on this topic.

Objectives of the Study

- To know the level and patterns of women autonomy in present scenario of India.
- To make the comparison of urban women's autonomy with rural women
- To study the variation in women autonomy within regional settings of urban areas.

Research Methodology

It contains the following procedures:

- **Research Design:** Being study exploratory in nature, it will go through collection of primary as well as secondary data through questionnaire, survey analysis and drawing some conclusions about the stated problem.
- **Research Method:** Being population so large, sampling method has been used instead of census method.
- **Sampling:**
 - 1) **Type:** Stratified random sampling has been made to give the proper representation to various regional settings i.e. metro cities, other cities and rural area.
 - 2) **Size:** Total 300 women were selected from various regions as below:
 - Sanghi Village to represent the rural area: 100
 - Delhi to represent the metro cities in urban area: 100
 - Rohtak to represent the other cities in urban area: 100
- **Analyzing Tools:** Percentage of respondents and indices of variables have been used to extract the factual position of women autonomy in rural and urban women.

- **Procedure:** Data set employed in present study are seeking to know the variation in women autonomy in different regional settings i.e. rural & urban and further more within the urban as in metro cities and other cities. One sample from each regional setting i.e. Delhi, Rohtak, Sanghi village was taken to represent the metro city, other city, and rural area respectively. A questionnaire was designed and circulated to the specified number of women in each regional setting and gathered information were analyzed and concluded on the basis of percentage of respondents and overall was indexed as composition of all stated variables of women autonomy.

Women Autonomy & Its Parameters/ Measures

Autonomy has been variously defined as “the ability – to obtain information and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one’s private concerns and those of one’s intimates (Dyson and Moore 1983:45); and “ the degree of women’s access to (and control over) material resources (including food, income, land and other forms of wealth) and to social resources (including knowledge, power and prestige) within family, in the community and in the society at the large” (Dixon 1978:6). We define the autonomy here as the control women have their own lives- the extent to which they have an equal voice with their husbands in matters affecting themselves and their families, control over material and other resources, access to knowledge and information, authority to take independent decisions, freedom from constraints on physical mobility, and the ability to forge equitable power relationships with families.

The mobility index totalities the number of five places—the health center, the village community center or market, home of a relative or friend, a fair, and the next village—to which the woman can go unescorted (S.J Jejeebhoy, 2001). Again, the intent was to select a range of places, both within and outside the village, both easy and more difficult to access. Hence for example, while a community center or market and friend’s home were always within the village, the health center and fairs were usually outside the village. The index ranges from 0 if the woman must be escorted everywhere to 5 if she can move about unescorted to each of the five places.

1. Economic decision-making authority is represented by information on the participation of women in three economic decisions, selected to capture a range of decisions, from the routine to the out of the normal, and also to capture the extent to which women simply participate in the decision or actually perceive themselves to have a major say in it. Items include: the purchase of food, major household goods, and jewelry. The index sums the number of these three purchases in which the woman participates, assigning a score of 1 if she only participates in the decision and 2 if she also has the major say. The index thus ranges from 0 to 6.
2. The index of access to and control over economic resources covers two aspects of women’s use of family and own resources: their freedom to use or manage household resources and the level to which they are independent to have the control over any resource. The index thus sums responses to seven questions. Four of these relate to access to household resources: (1) having a say in how household income is spent; (2) getting cash to spend; (3) being free to purchase small items of jewelry; and (4) being free to purchase gifts. Three relate to aspects of women’s expression of independent control over resources: (1) whether any of the family’s valuables (land/jewelry/ utensils) belong to the woman (that is, are in the woman’s name) and are controlled by her; (2) whether she has or had some say or the major say (assigned a value of 0.5 and 1.0 respectively) in how the money or things got from her dowry are used or expended; and (3) whether she believes to have it with her as a future security or savings for her rest of life. The index ranges from 0 to 7.
3. The index of freedom from threat ranges from 0 to 3: 0 is assigned if the woman both fears her husband and is beaten by him; 1 if she is beaten but does not fear her husband; 2 if she fears him but is not beaten; and 3 if she neither fears nor suffers beating at the hands of her husband. Here, the intention was to capture the continuum of power relations between spouses. In focus group discussions participants agreed that women who experienced a nonphysical rebuke from their husbands were indeed more likely to assert themselves than those who feared physical reprisals, and the index was constructed to reflect this.

In focus group discussions it became clear that women were acutely aware of these and other aspects of autonomy. We people know very well the range to which their freedom was restricted by social customs and the observant eyes of the family and man dominated society. They pointed out that older or educated women exerted

more say in their own lives than did the uneducated; they discussed the ways in which women who core sided with their parents-in-law were observed with respect to their conduct and actions. And in responding to the survey questionnaire, women were clearly able to outline the limits of their decision making power

Results & Discussions

Table 1 presents mean values of four measures, as well as the distributions of the variables constituting each measure. First of all it seems clearly that women have limited autonomy. Further results show that rural women have lesser autonomy than urban women in all spheres, further there is a strong differences in all regional settings i.e. village, city/ town and metro cities.

Table 1: Distribution of various measurement variables in different Regional Settings

Measurement Variables	Delhi (Metro city)	Rohtak (city other than metro)	Sanghi (Village)
<u>Mobility: can go unescorted to:</u>			
- Friend's home	89.5	70.6	30.3
- Market or community center in village	94.4	71.3	21.8
- Health center	67.4	49.2	10.5
- Fair	41.8	20.9	8.4
- Neighboring village	33.5	05.8	.71
Index (maximum value = 5)	3.27	2.17	1.12
<u>Economic Decision Making:</u>			
Participates in decisions-			
- Food	89.0	70.9	52.4
- Jewelry	56.9	40.5	20.7
- Major goods	49.0	32.3	12.5
Is main decision maker-			
- Food	72.4	51.3	35.27
- Jewelry	11.1	07.2	4.97
- Major goods	11.8	5.2	1.42
Index (maximum value = 6)	2.91	2.07	1.26
<u>Access to & Control over Economic Resources:</u>			
- Has a say in household spending	93.5	80.4	50.39
- Gets money to spend	84.7	75.9	20.52
- Is free to purchase small jewelry	28.0	15.7	2.47
- Is free to purchase gifts for relatives	17.8	14.3	7.32
- Owns and controls household Valuables	22.6	12.5	49.34
- Plans to use own savings for future support	43.8	38.4	79.29
- Has some say in disbursal of dowry	29.2	32.5	3.14
- Has major say in disbursal of dowry	62.2	63.7	1.23
Index (maximum value = 7)	3.71	3.33	1.34

<u>Freedom from threat:</u>			
- Has been beaten by and fears husband	18.6	30.7	39.62
- Has been beaten by husband	38.6	45.8	62.7
- Fears husband	36.8	25.6	19.9
- Neither beaten by nor fears husband	43.3	28.3	11.7
Index (maximum value = 3)	1.37	1.30	.67

As per table 1, overall women mobility seems limited, but in metro cities it is highest in comparison to cities and rural areas. Within the five sub-variables/ places, mobility of women to market or community center is highest whereas least freedom seems in mobility to neighboring village. As per respondents' view, urban women's mobility is more in comparison to rural women where as within the same setting of urban, metro cities are one step ahead to other cities. As index of mobility in metro city Delhi is 3.27 that is highest, in other city Rohtak is 2.17 at second place and in Sanghi village which represents the rural area, is mere .71 that is lowest. So index values confirm that diversity in women mobility exists in various regional settings of India.

But in rural areas, figure of women as independent decision maker, is very low or equivalent to negligible especially on jewellery and major goods decisions, so most of the decisions are taken by men only. Women access to and control over resources, is also limited, while the majority of women have a say in how husband's income is spent and cash to spend, few feel free to make small purchases of jewellery or gifts on their own. In regional urban settings variation also has been found as women living in metro cities are more likely to have a say in the disbursement of household income and to get cash to spend compared to women from other cities.

Regarding ownership and control over household valuables and own dowry disparities are interesting one, rural women have more authority about disbursement of their dowry that means it is taken as their personal asset gifted by their parents and rural men take it as their embarrassment to have the charge and interfere in decisions regarding that as data is 49.34% and 79.29% in some saying and major saying in its disbursement respectively which is higher than individual as well as combined setting.

In comparison to the regional disparities found for decision making, freedom of movement and access to and over the resources. Regional variation in women's freedom from threat is muted. The index of freedom from threat suggests that urban women are slightly freer from threat than the rural women. But within the same settings of urban, metro cities is further one step ahead to other cities. As index doesn't shows the much more variation in different regional settings that overall variation is very little but individually it varies a lot, as physical beating is more in rural areas as compared to urban settings whereas its revert aspect automatically proves the more freedom from threat of women in metro cities in comparison to other cities and rural areas.

In summary, urban women have significantly more decision making authority, mobility, and access to and over the control over resources from rural women. Further in both settings of urban i.e. metro cities and other cities, same kind of gap exists but its level is low in comparison to rural areas (villages). Only one exception has been found that rural women are more independent about participating in decisions regarding their dowry as well as its disbursement decisions. In overall rural women have little autonomy because of Indian traditions and customs which have not been cracked because of illiteracy where as being more illiterate the urban women are aware of their rights so that more autonomy witnessed there.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of surveyed data, study reveals that women autonomy in terms of decision making, mobility, freedom from threats and access to and control over the resources, varies a lot in different regional settings i.e. rural vs. urban and with in urban- metro cities vs. other cities. A high degree of disparity has been found in women autonomy between rural and urban whereas it smaller in between in different settings of urban i.e. metro cities vs. other cities in comparison to rural vs. urban but such gap is significant which states that being the more education and awareness in metro cities are moving on the way of gender equality. Rural women also conversated that social conservatism, traditions, customs, cultural factors etc curbed their autonomy. So our findings confirm the gender inequality, considerable variation in the levels and determinants of women's

autonomy in various regional settings. Now women's demands for autonomy have taken different forms from the colonial period onwards. It had different focal points at different times. At times it is centered on questions of education and at other times on legislative reforms. Being providing gender equality by our constitution, it is revealed that something yet has been left to be done to ensure the women autonomy at households' level.

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