

Original Research Article

A study of empowerment level in currently married women in western Maharashtra, India

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ABSTRACT

Background: Empowerment of women in all fields constitutes one of the fundamental objectives of development efforts in a region. Laws can support the endeavour of women's empowerment, but considering the complex cultural beliefs and practices that lie at the root of the imbalance, the effectiveness of such isolated efforts remains doubtful. Present study was planned to assess level of women's empowerment in western region of Maharashtra with objectives to measure various direct and indirect indicators of women's empowerment by different background characteristics.

Methods: A cross-sectional study using structured questionnaire based interviews was carried out in female outpatients in tertiary care hospital. The sample of 300 currently married women in reproductive age-group was selected by systematic random sampling.

Results: Out of 360 women majority belonged to Hindu religion (65%), and households of middle standard of living (71.7%) and 76.6% women were married below age of 21. 38.3% women were always involved in household decision making. Regarding freedom of movement, 38.3% women have complete freedom whereas 41.7% women have some control over economic resources. But only 30% women have personal savings. 60% women have favourable attitude towards girls' education, and only 33.3% women defy domestic violence.

Conclusions: There are significant divergences in the direct and indirect indices of women's empowerment and there is much scope for improvement in self-esteem of women.

Keywords: Decision autonomy, Domestic violence, Gender equality, Indicators of empowerment, Patriarchy, Women Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing realization that development goals cannot be achieved unless gender inequalities are removed, and women are empowered to choose and decide about their own welfare, the welfare of their families, and the communities in which they live. Empowerment of women is a necessity for the very development of a society, since it enhances both the quality and the quantity of human resources available for development.¹ Hence, empowerment of women in all

fields constitutes one of the fundamental objectives of developmental efforts of the region. Many international forums have identified gender equality both as a development objective in itself, as well as a means to promote growth, reduce poverty, and promote better governance.¹

Empowerment is a process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources which will assist them to increase their self-reliance, and enhance them to assert their independent rights, and

challenge the ideology of patriarchy and the gender-based discrimination against women. This will also enable them to organize themselves to assert their autonomy to make decisions and choices, and ultimately eliminate their own subordination in all the institutions and structures of society.² At an individual level, women empowerment may be protective as a result of behavioral changes following improved health knowledge and care, and increased use of health services.³ Research conducted in South Asia and elsewhere has provided further evidence that women's status is correlated positively with the health status of women and children.⁴ Women's empowerment also plays a positive role in a nation's population stabilization policies.⁵

Various national and international agencies have addressed women's issues and taken various efforts to empower them so as to enhance their social and economic status. Laws can support the endeavor of women's empowerment, but considering the complex cultural beliefs and practices that lie at the root of the imbalance, the effectiveness of such isolated efforts remains doubtful. Women's empowerment is such a complex phenomenon that its measurement remains a problem for academicians and policy makers.⁶ Similarly, various spatial and socio-economic and cultural disparities exist within India.¹

The present study was planned to assess level of women's empowerment in western region of Maharashtra; with the objectives of measuring various direct and indirect indicators of women's empowerment and studying the level of women's empowerment by different background characteristics. The literature search has revealed that there are very few such studies in India and hence, findings of present study may be considered as baseline values for evaluation of any actions planned for women empowerment by government. The findings of the study can help to direct specific efforts for women empowerment to relevant substrata of the society.

METHODS

This cross sectional analytical study was conducted in a tertiary care hospital of western Maharashtra in October 2007. The study population comprised of currently married female outpatients of reproductive age group. As Education is one of the direct indicator of women empowerment, it was considered for sample size calculation. As per 2001 census the female literacy in Maharashtra state was 68%.⁷

Considering p as 68 and allowable error as 5, the required sample size came about 349. Hence a sample of 360 women was included in the study using systematic random sampling. A pre-tested structured questionnaire was used to conduct the face to face exit interviews. After obtaining the consent of the patient, the information regarding her demographic profile and regarding various indicators of women's empowerment was collected.

The women's empowerment has said to be having following dimensions-economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, psychological, political and legal.² In present study, certain variables (from household arena) of the first four dimensions were analyzed as direct and indirect indicators of women's empowerment.

The variables related to women's empowerment have been categorized into two groups.⁸ The first category is referred to as 'indirect indicators' of empowerment and includes education, occupation, age and educational differences between spouses and use of contraceptive devices. These indicate the characteristics that have relevance in influencing a woman's access to and control over resources.⁹ The second group is direct indicators of empowerment, and consists of indicators such as involvement in decision making (decision autonomy) about family matters and health care, freedom of movement and access to economic resources and savings in her own name.¹⁰ The responses for direct indicators were categorized as 'Not present', 'Partial' and 'Complete'.

The third group of indicators that was studied was, 'evidence of empowerment', which included current practice of family planning methods, attitude towards girl's education and the extent of self-esteem as indicated by their attitude towards domestic violence/intimate partner Violence.¹¹ The attitude towards domestic violence was assessed by asking respondents if they would justify partner abuse of a woman for one or several reasons such as.¹²

- If he suspects her of being unfaithful;
- If her natal family does not pay the promised dowry;
- If she shows disrespect towards her in-laws;
- If she goes out without informing him;
- If she neglects the house or children;
- If she does not cook properly and
- If she does not have male child. A woman's self-esteem was high if she does not agree with any of these reasons as justification for wife beating.

The responses for each of these variables were suitably characterized 8 and a score was allocated to each category starting from '0' to '2'. The sum total of all these indicators was calculated to get a composite score of empowerment. The maximum attainable score was 24. Three levels of women's empowerment were considered based on the composite score achieved- as Low (score: 0-8), Medium (score 9-16) and High (score 17- 24).

Percentage distributions were made of the demographic and other relevant characteristics of the respondents. Many of the independent variables were transformed to reduce the number of categories wherever certain categories lacked enough subjects to enable meaningful statistical analysis. The transformations, however, remained logical. Various aspects of women empowerment were analyzed against certain predictable

variables like Age, religion, Caste, place of residence, SE status, type of family, education and occupation of the woman. Analysis was done by using appropriate statistical tests like Chi-square test and calculation of Odd's Ratio using statistical software (Primer of Biostat. 6.0).

RESULTS

The present study comprised of 360 currently married women in reproductive age group. Table 1 depicts the socio-demographic profile of the study sample. The mean age of the study population was 27 ± 6 years. Majority women (65%) were Hindu and 120 (33.33%) were from SC/ST category. 276 (76.67%) women were married below age of 21 yrs. A majority of the subjects 258 (71.67%) belonged to the middle socioeconomic group.

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of the study population (n = 360).

Factor	Category	N (% of total)
Age (in years)	< 20	84 (23.33)
	21-25	90 (25)
	26-30	84 (23.33)
	31-35	72 (20)
	>35	30 (8.34)
Religion	Hindu	234 (65)
	Muslim	36 (10)
	Bauddha	48 (13.33)
	Christian	36 (10)
	Jain	6 (1.67)
Caste	SC/ST	120 (33.33)
	Others	240 (66.67)
Place of residence	Urban	228 (63.33)
	Rural	132 (36.67)
Socio-economic standard	Upper	24 (6.67)
	Middle	258 (71.67)
	Lower	78 (21.66)
Type of family	Nuclear	108 (30)
	Joint (without in-laws)	48 (13.33)
	Joint (with in-laws)	204 (56.67)
Age at marriage (years)	≤ 21	276 (76.67)
	> 21	84 (23.33)

The distribution of women across the ten factors used to create the indicators of empowerment is shown in Table 2. The analysis of indirect indicators showed that, the literacy rate of study subjects was 83.33%, majority of women did not complete their SSC (46.66%), were not working (73.33%), had moderate age difference with their spouse (41.66%) and had educational difference of ≤ 5 classes with their spouse (85%) having educational level less than their husbands. 156 (43.33%) had never used any contraceptive method in their life.

As for the direct indicators of empowerment, 138 (38.33%) women were always involved in decision making in family matters, 210 (58.33%) women could take decisions regarding health matters. Complete freedom for movement was seen in 138 (38.33%) women. While complete control of a woman on economic resources was not present, 150 (41.67%) had partial control. But only 30% of women had personal savings.

The level of empowerment in study subjects as per the composite score and its distribution according to various predictor variables is shown in Table 3. The associations of age of women, her religion and caste, place of residence, socioeconomic standard and her education and occupation with the level of empowerment were found to be statistically significant. The proportion of empowered women was found to increase with increasing age. Women from Muslim religion had maximum proportion of women with low level of empowerment. The women from SC/ST category showed low level of empowerment. Similarly, women from urban area were better empowered than the rural women. The proportion of women having high level of empowerment increased as the level of women's education increased. Starting from '0' in illiterate women, it increased to 90% in graduate women. Work involvement of woman was found to be positively associated with level of empowerment.

A total of 60% of women had favorable attitude towards girls' education. They showed no gender preference in children's education and wanted to give equal or more education to their daughters. The proportion of women having self-esteem was found to be low (33.33%). Rest of the women (67.67%) justified the intimate partner violence for various reasons; the commonest reason being 'disrespectful behavior of wife towards her in-laws.'

Table 4 shows analysis of direct indicators of empowerment and indicators of evidence of empowerment against various predictor variables. A woman educated till SSC or more is 4.5 times more likely to have decision autonomy, 5 times more likely to get movement freedom and economic control, 7 times more likely to have favorable attitude towards girls' education and 9 times more likely to defy domestic violence in form of intimate partner violence and to have more self-esteem. Work participation of the woman was also found to be significantly associated with all the indicators. It was strongly correlated with economic control of the woman (OR 174.26).

A woman from nuclear family had significantly more freedom of movement. Strong correlation was seen between caste of the female and her freedom of movement. Young age of the woman was found to be indicative of her favorable attitude to girls' education, but for other indicators older women showed better empowerment score achievements.

Table 2: Distribution of women by indirect and direct indicators of empowerment.

Indicators	Categories	N (%)	
Indirect indicators	Women's education	Illiterate	60 (16.67)
		< SSC	168 (46.66)
		SSC TO HSC	72 (20)
		Degree +	60 (16.67)
	Women's occupation	Not working	264 (73.33)
		Working- not for cash	12 (3.33)
		Working for cash	84 (23.34)
	Age difference between spouses	Big (> 6 years)	108 (30)
		Moderate (3 -6 years)	150 (41.66)
		Little (< 3 years)	102 (28.34)
	Educational difference between spouses	> 5 classes	36 (10)
		≤ 5 classes	306 (85)
	Use of contraceptive method	More than husband	18 (5)
Never user		156 (43.33)	
Ever user		84 (23.33)	
Direct indicators	Decision making power about family matters	Current user	120 (33.34)
		Not involved	132 (36.67)
		Partially involved	90 (25)
	Decision making power about health care	Completely involved	138 (38.33)
		Not involved	150 (41.67)
		Partially involved	-
	Freedom of movement	Completely involved	210 (58.33)
		No freedom	132 (36.67)
		Incomplete freedom	90 (25)
	Control over economic resources	Complete freedom	138 (38.33)
		No control	210 (58.33)
		Partial control	150 (41.67)
	Savings (own)	Complete control	-
Absent		252 (70)	
Total women	Present	108 (30)	
		360 (100)	

DISCUSSION

The effect of various measures being taken in India to increase women's empowerment is evident through the indicators of broader arena 3 such as increase in female literacy over the years, women's representation in high paying jobs and in regional and national bodies of government.¹³ Even though we have had a female Prime Minister and female President of India in past, the overall level of women's empowerment at household arena is much discouraging.

In present study, the mean composite score of empowerment was found to be 10.77 (SD-5.12, Range-2 to 21) and the median was 10. That means 50% women have not even reached till halfway in process of empowerment. The level of empowerment showed variation across nearly all predictor variables in the study. The majority of socio-demographic disparities observed in the present study are in accordance with the national

level findings based on the DHS survey (National Family Health Survey, 1998-99).¹

But on the other hand, the finding that more than half of the study subjects showed medium or high level of empowerment is encouraging. Similarly, the proportion of the women with high degree of freedom for movement (31.67%) and of those showing no gender preference attitude towards children's education (60%) were higher than the national average of 23% and 40% respectively.¹

The women with higher freedom for movement are more likely to utilize the health care facilities and favorable attitude towards girl's education will further help the movement of women empowerment.^{2,14,15}

The decision autonomy (33.33%) and attitude of defying domestic violence (33.33%) of the study subjects were found to be lower than the national average of 43% each.¹ This is indicative of lower self-esteem of these women,

even though they showed higher literacy rate (83.3%) than national (54%) and state (68%) level as per the 2001 census.⁷ Level of decision autonomy was shown to be associated with fertility and related behavior.¹⁶ Its low level observed in present study is of great concern for fertility control programs. Similarly, the couple

protection rate (33.34%) in the study subject was found to be much less than the national level (46.2%) and state level (49.3%).¹⁵ Even though 67.67% women justified wife beating, it was encouraging to find that none of them justified it for the reason of 'not being able to produce a male child'.

Table 3: Level of empowerment in currently married women.

Factor	Category	Level of empowerment: n (%)			Total	Statistical significance
		Low	Medium	High		
Age	< 20	36 (42.9)	48 (57.1)	0	84 (100)	Significant P<0.001
	21-25	30 (33.3)	48 (53.4)	12 (13.3)	90 (100)	
	26-30	42 (50)	18 (21.4)	24 (28.6)	84 (100)	
	31-35	18 (25)	24 (33.3)	30 (41.7)	72 (100)	
	> 35	6 (20)	6 (20)	18 (60)	30 (100)	
Religion	Hindu	78 (33.3)	90 (38.5)	66 (28.2)	234 (100)	Significant P< 0.005
	Muslim	30 (83.3)	6 (16.7)	0	36 (100)	
	Bauddha	24 (50)	12 (25)	12 (25)	48 (100)	
	Christian	0	30 (83.3)	6 (16.7)	36 (100)	
	Jain	0	6 (100)	0	6 (100)	
Caste	SC/ST	66 (55)	42 (35)	12 (10)	120 (100)	Significant P<0.001
	Others	66 (27.5)	102 (42.5)	72 (30)	240 (100)	
Place of residence	Urban	66 (28.9)	90 (39.5)	72 (31.6)	228 (100)	Significant P<0.001
	Rural	66 (50)	54 (40.9)	12 (9.1)	132 (100)	
Socio-economic standard	Upper	6 (25)	12 (50)	6 (25)	24 (100)	Significant P<0.001
	Middle	60 (2.3)	120 (46.5)	78 (30.2)	258 (100)	
	Lower	66 (84.6)	12 (15.4)	0	78 (100)	
Type of family	Nuclear	36 (33.4)	48 (44.4)	24 (22.2)	108 (100)	N s P>0.05
	Joint	96 (38.1)	96 (38.1)	60 (23.8)	252 (100)	
Education	Illiterate	54 (90)	6 (10)	0	60 (100)	Significant P<0.001
	< SSC	72 (42.8)	90 (53.6)	6 (3.6)	168 (100)	
	SSC - HSC	6 (8.3)	42 (58.4)	24 (33.3)	72 (100)	
	Degree +	0	6 (10)	54 (90)	60 (100)	
Occupation	Not working	132 (50)	126 (47.7)	6 (2.3)	264 (100)	Significant P<0.001
	Working	0	18 (18.8)	78 (81.2)	96 (100)	
Total		132 (36.7)	144 (40)	84 (23.3)	360 (100)	

It was observed that nearly all variables studied were found to have significant associations with most of the indicators of empowerment. Various studies have shown such associations of varying degrees.^{1,7,14} The difference in findings may be due to cultural differences in varying study areas. But the most noticeable effects were those of education and work participation of the women on direct indicators of empowerment. Similar findings were observed by Sharma U, Roy TK and Gupta K.^{1,9,17} This trend holds promise because levels of education are increasing in Indian females.

CONCLUSION

In Conclusion, identifying factors associated with women's empowerment not only pin-points priority

groups who require intervention-like females from rural area, from SC/ST category etc.; but also identifies possible obstacles to such interventions.

However, the situation in India is complex, partly due to religious doctrines, and partly due to traditional/cultural beliefs that tend to have a powerful influence on women themselves. Because most of the determinants of women's empowerment examined here are unlikely to change very much, a concerted effort must be made to examine the effects of different types of empowerment programs so as to modify them accordingly.

And to assess the change produced by these renewed empowerment programs, the present study findings will provide the baseline empowerment levels in this region.

Table 4: Odds ratio for certain indicators of empowerment with regards to predictable variables

Factor	Category	Presence of decision autonomy	Presence of movement freedom	Presence of economic control	No gender preference in education	Defies intimate partner violence
Age	≤ 30	0.62	0.39*	0.27*	3.03*	0.31*
	>30	(0.38-0.99)	(0.24-0.62)	(0.16-0.45)	(1.85-4.96)	(0.18-0.49)
Religion	Hindu	1.56*	1.79*	2.52*	0.89	1.40
	Others	(1.03-2.75)	(1.09-2.92)	(1.40-4.52)	(0.57-1.38)	(0.87-2.24)
Caste	Non-SC/ST	0.64	61.65*	3.78*	1.87*	3.37*
	SC/ST	(0.41-1.02)	(3.47-12.73)	(1.96-7.29)	(1.19-2.89)	(1.99-5.67)
Place of residence	Urban	1.14	1.99*	4.52*	4.67*	3.27*
	Rural	(0.70-1.76)	(1.22-3.23)	(2.35-8.72)	(2.94-7.41)	(1.96-5.47)
Se status	High	0.65	7.5*	1.12	2.09	2.11
	Low	(0.25-1.68)	(2.99-19.46)	(0.43 -2.92)	(0.81-5.40)	(0.91-4.85)
Type of family	Nuclear	0.46*	3.2*	0.86	1.07	1
	Joint	(0.28-0.78)	(1.99-5.15)	(0.50-1.49)	(0.67-1.69)	(0.62-1.61)
Education	≥ SSC	4.5*	5.31*	51.8*	7.82*	9.33*
	< SSC	(2.82-7.18)	(3.29-8.58)	(21.4-125.1)	(4.46-13.7)	(5.64-15.4)
Occupation	Working	3.86*	3.0*	174.26*	4.75*	13.5*
	Non-working	(2.36-6.29)	(1.84 -4.88)	(67.2-451.7)	(2.69-8.36)	(7.72-23.5)

Some categories have been merged for analysis. * p < 0.05; figures in parenthesis indicate 95% confidence interval of odds ratio

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