

Women’s Empowerment in Household Decision-making among the Poor and Non-poor in Nepal

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Abstract

Women empowerment is taken as one of the major agenda for the twenty-first century in national and international development issues. The primary objective of this study is to examine the factors associated with women empowerment in household decision-making among poor and non-poor women in Nepal. This study uses data from the 2016 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey. The analytic sample size of this study is 9575 currently married women aged 15-49. Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression was used to examine the effect of demographic and socio-economic variables on women empowerment in household decision-making. The analysis of the result showed there is a significantly high variation between empowerment status and demographic and socio-economic background among the poor and non-poor. Women who have more children, older age, working women, and residing in urban areas were significant association and more likely to empower in household decision-making than having no children, young age and not working women among both poor and non-poor household wealth. However, women have significantly more decision-making power among non-educated women to compare with educated among poor; it is a quite inverse result among non-poor. Thus, this study suggests that it needs to identify and explore the pertinent issues with genuine reasons of the gap to be empowered in a variety of groups of population in Nepal.

Keywords: empowerment, household decision-making, poor, non-poor

Introduction

The empowerment of women has become one of the central concerns of the 21st century. It is an important goal and widely considered an undetectable aspect in achieving sustainable development worldwide (Huis, Hansen, Otten, & Lensink,

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2017). Empowering women is a multidimensional process that enables individuals to think, take action, and control work in an autonomous way (Bayeh, 2016; Dandona, 2015; Gagné, Senecal, & Koestner, 2006; O'Neil, Domingo, & Valters, 2014) through collective action, constitutional and legal reform, social and economic policy measures, and changes in socio-cultural norms (O'Neil et al., 2014) and brings the positive change in individual or society. Kabeer (2005) claimed women empowerment is intrinsic and explicitly valued rather than an instrumental goal. Therefore, women empowerment is uniquely powerful and positively valued itself.

Empowerment is a broad concept and can be defined in many ways. It is depending on the context or circumstance (Alkire et al., 2013) and the determinants factors of empowerment may vary in terms of individual or group and context. They added the concept of empowerment is personal so each person has a unique definition based on his or her life experiences, personality, and aspirations. However, the control over the resources and decision-making are fundamental components and generally and commonly accepting issues while talking about women's empowerment (Haque, Islam, Tareque, & Mostofa, 2011; Rahman, 2013). He also clarifies empowerment is a process of positive change that improves women's fallback position and bargaining power within a patriarchal structure. Similarly (Kabeer, 1999) explains empowerment is a process of change that is achieved by the ability to exercise meaningful choices. She describes the dimensions of empowerment are Resources (pre-conditions), Agency (process), Achievements (outcomes). Agency is related to decision-making power which is important in strategic life choices. Hence, an empowered woman is able to be self-confident, critically analyses the surroundings, and exercise the control overall decision which positively affects her life (Habib, Shafiq, Afshan, & Qamar, 2019) and also returns to their families and even the society as a whole will be worth it (Paramasivan, 2013). Though women's empowerment is an instrument of social change (Edwards, 2015), Kabeer (1999) stated there is a logical association between poverty and disempowerment. She argues an insufficiency of the means for meeting one's basic needs often rules out the ability to exercise meaningful choices which are critical for people to live as they want such as choice of maintenance, whether and who to marry, and have children. She also added the responsibilities and routines of daily life, existing rules, norms, and customs lead them for well-being and empowerment status.

Women empowerment is taken as one of the major agenda in different national and international development issues. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994, Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 and their further current program of action, Millennium Development Goals in 2000, and The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development (SDGs) in 2016 are intensively focused on promoting gender equality and empowering women (United Nations, 2016). SDGs emphasize the commitments made in the ICPD, Beijing Platform for Action, and tackle some of the MDG's unfinished agenda such as Goal (SDG) 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (Kaltenborn, Krajewski, & Kuhn, 2020). It is taken as one of the key thematic priorities (Asian Development Bank, 2016) and crucial importance and fundamental concern to achieve the sustainable development goals and targets. Nepal, as a member of the UN, is committed to being part of the global Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2017).

Human beings are 'active agents of change' through their agency (Sen, 2005). More than half (51.5%) of the female population constitute Nepal. Similarly, the sex ratio was found to be lowest in age groups 20-24, 25-29, and 30-34 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014). It also showed women's economic activity is still low in non-agriculture sectors in Nepal. This is the situation that an energetic female population needs to be empowering for the development in the society, though Nepal has predominantly been a patriarchal society and females occupy an inferior position and are subordinate to men in virtually every aspect of life in Nepal (Bhattarai, 2014). Similarly, United Nations (2017) highlighted male dominate power structures in society limit women's rights, well-being, and opportunities. Thus, empowerment is particularly significant for women in main stream of development agenda for the nation's prosperity. Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2016 describes the women's empowerment in household decision-making in different socio-demographic and economic backgrounds and showed more than half of currently married women participate themselves or jointly with her husband in decisions regarding their own health care, involved in major household purchases and visit to their family or relatives (Ministry of Health Nepal, New ERA, & ICF, 2017). In this context, this study focuses on women's empowerment in household decision-making among poor and non-poor household wealth index in different socio-demographic, economic, and geographical backgrounds with descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate analysis which will provide new contributions while focusing and achieving the limited study in Nepal.

Method

Data sources and sample size

The data for the analysis is extracted from the datasets of the 2016 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS). The 2016 NDHS is the fifth nationally representative comprehensive survey conducted as part of the worldwide Demographic and Health Surveys. The Survey was conducted by New ERA under the aegis of the Ministry of Health with technical assistance from ICF and with financial support from the United States Agency for International Development.

The survey identified 13089 women aged 15-49 from 11040 households, of which 12862 women age 15-49 were interviewed, yielding a response rate of 98%. However, this study comprised a total of 9875 currently married women aged 15-49. The study population was grouped into poor and non-poor based on household wealth quintiles. Women who belonged to the lowest and second wealth quintiles are considered as poor and women who belonged to the middle, fourth and highest wealth quintile are treated as non-poor. The analytic sample size is restricted to 3632 for poor and 6242 for non-poor women.

Variables

Dependent variables

The dependent variable of this study is women's empowerment which is measured by women's participation in three types of household decision-making includes (i) own health care, (ii) major household purchases, and (iii) visits to their family or relatives. Responses were coded as 1. respondent alone, 2. respondent and husband/partner jointly, 3. respondent and other person, 4. husband/partner alone, 5. someone else, and 6. other. First, these responses are categorized dichotomously as 'yes' and 'no'. The first three responses (1-3) were coded as 1 for 'yes' and responses 4-6 were coded as 0 for 'no'. Then, the single composite variable was constructed by grouping women into two categories: women who did not involve any decisions in all three decisions, indicating a lower level of empowerment, and women who involved at least one household decision, indicating a higher level of empowerment.

Independent variables

Demographic, socio-economic, and spatial variables have a significant impact on dimensions of women's empowerment (Khudri & Dey, 2015). The variables included

in demographic variables are age of women [15-24, 25-34, 35-49], children ever born [0, 1-2, 3 or more]. The variables included in socio-economic variables are women's education, caste/ethnicity, working status [no working, agricultural, non-agricultural], and wealth quintile. Similarly, provinces and places of residence (rural/urban) are taken as a spatial variables.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using STATA version 15.1. This study applied both bivariate and multivariate analysis. First, a chi-square test was performed to examine the association between dependent and independent variables. Variables that were significant in bivariate analysis then included multivariate analysis. Multivariate logistic regression analysis was done to identify the effects of independent variables on women's empowerment. The results of the multivariate analysis were presented in terms of adjusted odds ratio (AOR) with a 95% confidence interval. DHS follows the complex sample design in data collection. Hence, a complex sample design was taken into account in multivariate logistic regression analysis.

Results

Bi-variate analysis

Table 1 revealed that about 70 percent of poor household women and 74 percent of non-poor household women are empowered in household decision-making. It is also found that women empowerment is higher in age 25-34 and 35-49 compared with age 15-24 in both poor and non-poor household wealth women. Similarly, women who have no children were less likely empowered than have children. Women empowerment is increasing while numbers of their children were also increased (41% having no children, 68% in 1-2 children and 76% in 3 or more children) among poor wealth index though it is a slightly different condition that women's empowerment is high (76%) if women have at least one child (1-2 and 3 or more) than having no children they have (56%) while talking among non-poor wealth index.

Women's working condition seems important in household decision-making. Women of working status are significantly associated with empowerment in decision-making among both poor and non-poor. Women empowerment in household decision-making is high among working women of poor and non-poor household wealth.

Education is taken as positively influencing women empowerment (Khudri & Dey, 2015). This study demonstrates the result that more women are having no education than having other levels of education among both poor and non-poor wealth index. However, the poverty context clearly showed more respondents is having a primary, secondary and higher level of education among non-poor than the poor household index of women. The result found remarkably that women have more decision-making power among non-educated women in comparison educated among poor and it is quite inverse among non-poor where the decision-making power is found high according to the level of education among them. Likewise, though the Muslim and in province two, women have less decision-making power among non-poor to compare with other caste and provinces, Muslim and Janajati and Karnai province seems low among poor wealth index household of women than others. As expected, urban women were more likely to participate in decision-making than women in rural areas among both types of wealth index.

Table 1: Percent distribution of empowerment of women among poor and non-poor according to background characteristics, NDHS 2016.

| Characteristics | Poor | | | Non-poor | | |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------|
| | % | N | χ^2 p-value | % | N | χ^2 p-value |
| Age of women | | | | | | |
| 15-24 | 48.7 | 966 | <0.001 | 48.6 | 1423 | <0.001 |
| 25-34 | 75.7 | 1269 | | 78.0 | 2413 | |
| 35-49 | 79.0 | 1397 | | 85.3 | 2406 | |
| Children Ever Born | | | | | | |
| 0 | 40.8 | 327 | <0.001 | 56.0 | 656 | <0.001 |
| 1-2 | 68.3 | 1408 | | 76.0 | 3321 | |
| 3 or more | 75.9 | 1897 | | 76.7 | 2266 | |
| Working status | | | | | | |
| Not working | 58.3 | 644 | <0.001 | 66.9 | 2497 | <0.001 |
| Working | 72.3 | 2988 | | 86.0 | 3745 | |
| Level of education | | | | | | |
| No education | 73.6 | 1900 | <0.001 | 70.5 | 2084 | <0.001 |
| Primary | 68.9 | 742 | | 71.0 | 1111 | |
| Secondary | 62.5 | 809 | | 74.3 | 2082 | |
| Higher | 66.0 | 181 | | 85.3 | 965 | |
| Caste/Ethnicity | | | | | | |
| Bramin/Chhetri | 67.8 | 1143 | 0.092 | 84.4 | 1930 | <0.001 |
| Other Terai Caste | 65.4 | 293 | | 57.2 | 1332 | |
| Dalit | 67.6 | 675 | | 71.8 | 589 | |
| Janajati | 73.1 | 1447 | | 80.2 | 1961 | |
| Muslim | 72.3 | 74 | | 55.9 | 430 | |
| Province | | | | | | |
| Province 1 | 77.8 | 669 | <0.001 | 85.1 | 986 | <0.001 |
| Province 2 | 64.9 | 516 | | 59.5 | 1652 | |
| Bagmati | 75.4 | 536 | | 88.4 | 1384 | |
| Gandaki | 74.6 | 365 | | 83.1 | 586 | |
| Lumbini | 67.5 | 597 | | 64.7 | 1152 | |
| Karnali | 55.4 | 478 | | 78.8 | 108 | |
| Sudoorpashchim | 71.4 | 472 | | 70.6 | 375 | |
| Place of residence | | | | | | |
| Urban | 71.6 | 1731 | 0.139 | 79.0 | 4300 | <0.001 |
| Rural | 68.1 | 1902 | | 63.2 | 1942 | |
| Total | 69.8 | 3632 | | 74.1 | 6242 | |

Multivariate analysis

Although various factors found are important predictors of women empowerment, this study has attempted to examine the effects of only some socio-demographic and economic variables on women empowerment and identify the factors that influence it. It employed the logistic regression analysis to identify the effect of some selected predictors variables on the role of household decision-making (empowerment) of women.

Adjusted logistic regression analysis shows that age of women, children ever born, working status are highly significant to women empowerment in decision-making among women of poor wealth quintile. Among non-poor women, age of women, children ever born, women's education, province, and caste/ethnicity have a statistically significant contribution on women empowerment in decision-making. As table 2 shows that women aged 25-34 and 35-49 have statistically significant higher odds of women empowerment in household decisions among women of poor wealth quintiles (AOR=3.02, $p<0.001$ and AOR=3.81, $p<0.001$ respectively) compared with young women age 15-24. Likewise, women aged 25-34 and 35-49 have statistically significant higher odds of women empowerment in decision-making among women of non-poor wealth quintiles (AOR=3.20, $p<0.001$ and AOR=6.09, $p<0.001$ respectively) compared with women age 15-24.

Children ever born have shown a strong relationship with women empowerment in decision-making among poor and non-poor women. Women with the higher number of children ever born have more likely to women empowerment in decision-making. The odds of women empowerment with 1-2 and 3 or more children were 2.1 times (AOR=2.12, $p<0.001$) and 1.9 times (AOR= 1.92, $p<0.001$) respectively higher than women with no children among women who belonged to poor wealth quintile. Similarly, the odds of women empowerment with 1-2 and 3 or more children were 1.5 times (AOR=1.52, $p<0.001$) and 1.6 times (AOR=1.61, $p<0.01$) respectively higher than women with no children among women of non-poor.

The odds of women empowerment in decision-making were 53% higher for working women of poor wealth quintile whereas the odds of women empowerment in decision-making were 25 times higher for working women of non-poor household wealth.

Regarding the educational attainment and empowerment status, it is found that there was no statistically significant relationship between women's education and empowerment among women of poor household wealth. Among non-poor women, the odds of empowerment are significantly higher among women with higher education (AOR=2.75, $p<0.001$) and secondary education (AOR=1.55, $p<0.001$) compared with women with no education.

Women of poor household wealth who live in Province 2, Lumbini and Karnali were significantly less likely to empower women in decision-making compared with women who lived in Province 1. Similarly, women who reside in Province 2, Lumbini, Karnali, and Sudoorpashchim were significantly less likely to empower in decision-making compared with women who live in Province 1.

Considering caste/ethnicity, Terai caste and Muslim were less likely to empower in decision-making compared with Brahmin/Chhetri among poor household wealth. Likewise, women living in rural areas were less likely to participate in household decision-making than women in urban areas.

Table 2: Multivariate logistic regression analysis assessing factors affecting women empowerment in decision-making among poor and non-poor women, NDHS 2016

| | Poor | | Non-poor | |
|---------------------------|---------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| | AOR | 95% CI | AOR | 95% CI |
| Age of women | | | | |
| 15-24 | 1.00 | | 1.00 | |
| 25-34 | 3.02*** | 2.42 - 3.78 | 3.20*** | 2.60 - 3.93 |
| 35-49 | 3.81*** | 2.84 - 5.12 | 6.09*** | 4.48 - 8.27 |
| Children ever born | | | | |
| 0 | 1.00 | | 1.00 | |
| 1-2 | 2.12*** | 1.60 - 2.80 | 1.52*** | 1.20 - 1.93 |
| 3 or more | 1.92*** | 1.40 - 2.64 | 1.61** | 1.20 - 2.17 |
| Working status | | | | |
| Not working | 1.00 | | 1.00 | |
| Working | 1.53*** | 1.22 - 1.92 | 1.25* | 1.05 - 1.49 |
| Women's education | | | | |
| No education | 1.00 | | 1.00 | |
| Primary | 1.13 | 0.86 - 1.47 | 1.10 | 0.86 - 1.41 |
| Secondary | 1.21 | 0.95 - 1.53 | 1.55*** | 1.20 - 2.00 |
| Higher | 1.27 | 0.84 - 1.90 | 2.75*** | 1.86 - 4.07 |
| Province | | | | |
| Province 1 | 1.00 | | 1.00 | |
| Province 2 | 0.60* | 0.37 - 0.97 | 0.41*** | 0.30 - 0.56 |
| Bagmati | 0.85 | 0.50 - 1.44 | 0.91 | 0.52 - 1.60 |
| Gandaki | 0.77 | 0.45 - 1.34 | 0.67 | 0.41 - 1.07 |
| Lumbini | 0.55* | 0.34 - 0.89 | 0.32*** | 0.23 - 0.45 |
| Karnali | 0.37*** | 0.22 - 0.60 | 0.52* | 0.30 - 0.90 |
| Sudoorpashchim | 0.65 | 0.41 - 1.04 | 0.35*** | 0.24 - 0.50 |
| Caste/ethnicity | | | | |
| Brahman/Chhetri | | | 1.00 | |
| Dalit | | | 0.86 | 0.53 - 1.38 |
| Terai caste | | | 0.57** | 0.39 - 0.83 |
| Janajati | | | 0.91 | 0.67 - 1.23 |
| Muslim | | | 0.53** | 0.34 - 0.82 |
| Residence | | | | |
| Urban | | | 1.00 | |
| Rural | | | 0.79* | 0.64 - 0.97 |
| Constant | | | 1.18 | 0.68 - 2.05 |
| N | 4,198 | | 5,706 | |

Discussion

The result disclosed the women's empowerment status differently in some contexts among the related group. The study indicated that getting priority in the decision-making goes up with the increase in age as mentioned and significant association between age and women's household decision-making. Similarly, Respondent's working status is significantly associated with empowerment in household decision-making among poor and non-poor women. Likewise, decision-making power is found high according to the level of education among non-poor. This result is similar to the study of Bangladesh (Khudri & Dey, 2015).

The findings of the study are more or less similar to the previous studies, even though some of the findings were found differently than as in general results in poor and non-poor household women. For example, the result showed there was 38 percent participated in all three decisions and 28 percent participated in none of the decisions (Ministry of Health Nepal, New ERA, & ICF, 2017). But it was 33 percent (which seemed below national level) and 30 percent among poor and 40 percent (which seemed above national level) and 26 percent among non-poor these decisions respectively (not shown in table). It clearly shows that there is a logical association between poverty and disempowerment as mentioned by Kabeer (1999). Similarly, respondents' age 35 years and above is 6 times high among non-poor household wealth index of women and about 4 times more likely to among poor group empowered than age 15-24 years. This result prevailed non-poor household wealth index women's decision-making power is increasing more while age is older than poor wealth index women. Regarding the educational status and empowerment, the result remarkably showed the adverse result between poor and non-poor. It was found women who do not have education are more likely to compare with having education with significant association particularly among the poor household wealth of women. However, this situation seems the opposite among the non-poor. The study demonstrates reverse results among poor wealth index women. Generally, it is assumed education can play a major role to enhance women's empowerment (Khudri & Dey, 2015; Ghosh, Chakravarti, & Mansi, 2015; United Nations, 2010). However, Stromquist (2015) argues that sometimes education and schooling have been overestimated as pillars of empowerment. She added education needs to be connected to they are a part of economic, political, and psychological dimensions and an awareness of the social injustices and critical understanding of women's own lives (Ghosh et al., 2015; Stromquist, 2015). Thus, it can say that education may not always be backed to boost empowerment if it is unable

to link properly. Similarly, women involved in the non-agriculture sector seemed one of the prominent based of women's decision-making than working in agriculture and not working. It may be the cause of poor women having poor educational status which leads to less economic empowerment and bargaining power in households as shown by UNDP (2020).

Conclusion

The situation of women's empowerment found varying one group to another among the poor and the non-poor household wealth index. Though the general assumption is that the poor women are less likely to empower than the non-poor women, the household decision-making among the poor women especially in more number of children and working women seem to be significantly more likely empowered than non-poor women. Similarly, the uneducated women are more or less equally empowered to compare with educated women among poor household wealth index of women. The level of knowledge, attitudes, and practice in decision-making may vary in the same background characteristics among the poor and the non-poor women. So, the possible existing multiple realities need to be studied for further exploration in this area.

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