

Marital status and women empowerment in India

Abstract

Third Millennium Development Goal aims to empower women. Despite serious efforts, process of women empowerment has been lagging behind the target rate. Responsibility of marital status cannot be denied for such outcome because it has an important role in Indian women's life. Marriage in India is considered as an important social event and is supposed to transmit traditional values across generations. Hence, in orthodox society, lone women (unmarried/widow/ divorcee/ separated) are subject to disrespect in anticipation that they are rebelling against patriarchy. Again in this type of society, majority of Indian women are discouraged to opt job, therefore, marriage becomes the only option for their future settlement and security. Hence, life of Indian women is supposed to spin around their marital status, which possibly has some influence on their level of empowerment. Present study evaluate the influence of marital status on women empowerment, explores the possible reasons of difference in empowerment, if any, and suggest some way-out to eliminate this difference. Except married women, all lone women is found to have miserably low empowerment and are not allowed to take part in the familial decisions though they have the right to keep money for their own use and enjoy some mobility freedom.

Keywords: marital status, lone women, empowerment

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Introduction

Marital status and women empowerment in India

Institution of marriage is witnessed in every type of society around the world. It can be perceived as a legal contract, a religious rite and a social practice that varies by legal jurisdiction, religious doctrine and culture.¹ Irrespective to the type and culture, main objective of this social practice is to carry over traditional values, economic wealth and resources across generations. Additionally, it creates new Kinship bond, social network, accumulation of human labour etc. From time immemorial, male dominated orthodox Indian society considers marriage as one of the most important social events. Since Vedic age, marriage is considered as a most sacred relationship in India and is regarded as an obligatory duty and 'Samskara' (sacrament) for every Indian to lead a life of householder unless one decided to take a life of 'Sanyashi' (renouncer), Sighania.² Reasons behind such dictum may be to protect its tradition, culture as well as its patrilineal line of inheritance. In later period repeated invasions by outsiders push back the society into great danger, particularly, the life of women become less secured during that period. In this circumstance, parents find marriage as only option to provide safe life to their daughters indicating the increasing importance of marriage in Indian society. Thus, marriage in India is regarded as one of the mandatory social events, particularly for the women to live a meaningful life. Marriage traditionally has become virtually essential for every woman; therefore, lone women¹ are not much accepted form in Indian society. Consequently, they are more or less subject to insolence in the society. Among lone women, divorced or separated women are most unwanted sect in the society because according to Hindu ideology, marriage is a sacred relationship that is in vogue for procreation and continuation of family lineage only. It cannot be dissolved through divorce or any other means on personal grounds. However, Hindu civil code permit divorce in modern India, still it is not gladly

accepted in the society. During neoliberal period, Indian society, culture and economy are more or less dominated by the market. Marriage in this background does not lose its traditional significance; rather, patriarchy has transformed marriage into a market-friendly way. Still now, conception of parents regarding settlement of their off springs includes both economic as well as marital settlement. Following Indian culture, parents therefore feel their responsibility to arrange marriage for their offspring particularly for their daughters so that they can live with dignity. In this society women's dignity, respect, empowerment are steered by their marital status. Serving in-laws are recognized as an important function of women because patriarchy expects subordination of women. Reproduction has always been considered as an important part in Indian women's life and is prioritized over production. Marriage therefore becomes the only option for future settlement of Indian women in absence of their parents since it takes care of their security and livelihood. In such social environment, women's decision to remain single (unmarried, separated and divorcee) is codified as denial to their assigned duty of reproduction and transmitting the traditional social rules and values across generations. Moreover, there is a possibility of facing social and economic insecurity in absence of adequate income. Based on the above discussion, it can be argued that entire life of Indian women is regulated by their marital status. Even, their status in the family and society depends on their marital status. Most of the time lone women get lower status in the society and are subject to disrespect as well as physical and mental abuse. Due to such suppression, they often lack confidence that push them back from mainstream development process. In neoliberal India, national priority is to achieve economic growth as well as social development particularly gender equality. To get rid of gender inequality, government of India has adopted various measures, which are supposed to uplift the status of women and fetch relative betterment to them. All these efforts to some extent become successful to change society's attitude towards women but not to the extent to nullify the effect of marital status from their life. Generally, development process of a country is advocated to cover

¹Lone women signify to those who are unmarried, widow, separated and divorcee or abandoned.

the entire population for which mainstreaming of the excluded sections is recommended by various scholars. Mainstreaming process acknowledge empowerment as one of the weapon to combat inequality because power is bestowed to someone who is barred from access to power. In this context, empowerment can be defined as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.³ Empowerment thus evolved as a multidimensional aspect; therefore, empowerment in one sphere of life does not necessarily ensure empowerment in other spheres of life. As a backward section, mainstreaming of women becomes the focus of each policy and program. In this regard, both Government and various Non Government Organizations work simultaneously. Indian state had adopted many constitutional as well as welfare measures in favour of women, even National Women Commission was set up to take care of women related issues separately. Particularly state has formulated various policies for women keeping in view to achieve the Third Millennium Development Goal (MDG 3) whose objective is to promote gender equality and empower women. However, all these efforts have affected only a microscopic part of the Indian society while the vast pool of citizens has remained unaffected. As a result, lag is observed between the achieved and the targeted level. This surveillance raises several questions like why the sincere efforts of government and non-government organizations failed to earn requisite result, does marital status really have influence on women empowerment, whether lone women can avail their rights to take decisions within and outside the family. A minute and deep-rooted enquiry is required to detect the actual reasons of failure considering all possible socio-economic aspects. In this backdrop, present study is an endeavour to determine the impact of marital status (if any) on women empowerment, the difference of empowerment level between married and different categories of lone women, and locate the factors responsible for the difference of empowerment level if exists by marital status.

Past studies

Gender discrimination is a social construction and Indian society is no exception to this. Women are generally denied from various social, economic and political advantages. All these constraints cumulatively reduce women empowerment, resulting in gender inequality. Feminists described women as the poorest of the poor because in the poor families, repercussion of the disadvantages and exclusion whatever a male experience outside home, makes an outlet on the female of the family. Female of these families are abused both as female and as poor thereby lowering their empowerment. Many scholars advocate that absence of economic freedom is the main reason for low empowerment of women in the society.^{4,5} According to this school of thought, empowerment of Indian women depends on their economic freedom. In this direction, several studies examine the effect of micro finance on women empowerment.⁵⁻¹² However, economic independence helps women to achieve power but a study by Sharma Biswas¹³ shows that expected outcome is not always realized. This establishes that relative to economic factors, social and cultural factors have visibly more control on empowerment of women. Moreover, several studies establish that effect of social factors varies directly with its nature of strength of patriarchal relations. Alsop et al.¹⁴ prove that any intervention to improve agency and enhance opportunity structures can increase people's capacity to make effective choices. Some of the studies on empowerment examined its impact on health, education, fertility, development so on.⁷⁻²¹ Another study^{23,24}

pointed out the simultaneous relationship between empowerment and its determinants. All of them tried to verify that women's increasing empowerment ultimately enhance their children's education, better health condition and so on. On the other hand, higher education, better income and health condition or better life ultimately contribute to enhance their empowerment, which enriches development. However, all these studies overlooked the fact that whether all the pro-women efforts affect every single women or not. In addition, no one enquire the effect of the marital status of women on their empowerment. Since, life of Indian women spins around their marital status, there is a possibility of dominance of marital status over their empowerment and requires an enquiry in this direction.

Methodology

Data

Present study is based on the unit level data extracted from National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) conducted by IIPS during 2005-06 covering all the states in India. Although this is the only largest source of data related to women's problem, it provides information on women's background characteristics, household level problems, activities, their participation in job and household level decision-makings, but not on women's participation in politics and their level of income. Current study therefore concentrates mainly on various household level informations that are assumed to capture women's decision-making power in the family. It provides data both for married and unmarried women aged 15-49 years. In addition to empowerment related informations, there are some factors, which are assumed to act as proxy to socio-economic and cultural factors and are used as explanatory or causal factors (Table 1). Except a few, the variables are qualitative in nature.

Table 1 Socio economic background of women in India, 2005-06

Items		Rural	Urban	Total
No. of respondent		67424	56961	124385
Religion (%)	Hindu	74.1	70.4	72.4
	Muslim	11.1	16.3	13.5
	Others	14.8	13.3	14.1
Ethnicity (%)	SC	17.9	16.2	17.1
	ST	18.3	8.6	13.9
	OBC	34.2	30.9	32.7
	General	29.6	44.2	36.3
Unemployed women (%)		51.49	69.52	59.74
Employed women (%)		48.51	30.48	40.26
Literacy rate of women		57.33	80.68	68.02
Literacy rate of women by level of literacy	Illiterate	42.7	19.3	32
	Low	16.6	11.5	14.3
	Middle	36.9	50.9	43.3
	Higher	3.8	18.2	10.4

Source: Extracted data from National Family Health Survey, 2005-06.

Methods

As stated above NFHS 3 provides various socio economic informations that are supposed to capture the level of women empowerment. All these variables are grouped into three broad decision making categories namely

1. Access to and spending money decisions
2. Routine household decisions
3. Freedom of mobility

Based on these categories an Empowerment Index (EI) is developed, which is then classified as low, medium and high using the formula (maximum – minimum)/3. Further, a regression analysis is carried on to identify the determinants of empowerment.²⁴

Construction of empowerment index (EI)

To estimate the level of empowerment an EI of women is constructed based on three broad decision-making groups as:

1. Access to money and spending money decisions include women's capacity and right to (i) have money for her own use,
 - a. Have bank or savings account.
 - b. Have knowledge about loan programme.
 - c. Spends money.
 - d. Spends husband's earned money.
 - e. Make large purchases.
2. Routine household decisions include women's decisions regarding
 - a. Health care.
 - b. Daily purchase.
 - c. Visit to family and relatives.
 - d. Contraception use.
3. Mobility decisions include women being allowed to visit
 - a. Market.
 - b. Outside the village or community.
 - c. Health facility centre.

Specific scores are then assigned to different responses according to the intensity of the scale (Table A2). Empowerment Index (EI) is constructed for each respondent by combining all the above-mentioned categories. Initially for each respondent a ratio is estimated dividing sum of the recoded responses by total number of queries in each of the categories, namely access to and spending money decisions, routine household decisions and freedom of mobility. Then they are summed up to get the total value of the composite index.

Algebraically,

$$EI \text{ for } k^{\text{th}} \text{ respondent} = I_k = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^3 \sum_{i=1}^{N_j} x_{ijk}}{N_j}, \quad 0 \leq I_k \leq 3$$

Where, $x_{ijk} = i^{\text{th}}$ decision of j^{th} category for k^{th} respondent.

& $\sum_{i=1}^{N_j} x_{ijk} \leq N_j$; where is the number of decision making variables in j^{th} category, and varies by j .

To identify the determinants of empowerment, a multiple regression analysis is carried on. In this regard, EI is regressed on various socio-economic factors like religion, caste, media exposure, age, education, occupational and marital status of respondent, respondent's type of earning, household structure, her relationship to the household head and household's wealth index. This regression is performed first for EI as a whole then separate regressions are conducted by marital status to identify the factors that are responsible for the empowerment of women. The model used for multiple regressions is

$$EI = \beta_0 + \sum \beta_i \chi_j + \varepsilon \quad \text{where } i = 1, \dots, n, \text{ and } j = 1, \dots, m$$

Where β is the coefficient of exogenous variables and X stands for the casual factors, i stand for the number of individuals in the sample and j for various exogenous variables, and ε is the random unobserved disturbance term with mean zero and constant variance.

Profile of India

India belongs to South Asia and is the second most populous country in the world; its population is 1.2 billion (2011) and the growth rate of population is 1.76 during 2001–2011. Sex ratio is 940 female per 1000 males in 2011 (Table 1). As a whole 382 persons live per square kilometre (Census of India, 2011) and about 22 percent people live below poverty line (2011–2012). Total literacy rate in India is 74 percent, by gender, 82 percent males and 65 percent female (2011) are literate. However, in higher studies presence of women are noticeably small, for example female enrolment in engineering courses is only about 29 percent and in medical (MBBS) courses is only 49 percent (2015–16). On the other hand, percentages of women in higher-level jobs are also very poor. Among top-level jobs, highest number of women is available in Indian Administrative Services (IAS), which is only 12 percent, and this share further reduces to 4.67 percent in Indian Police Services (IPS) and 4.31 percent in Indian Forest Services (IFS) in the year 2006. Standard age of marriage in India is 19 years (Table A4) in the year 2011. Life expectancy in India is 68 years, which marginally increases (70 years) for female and decreases (67 years) for male in the year 2015. Birth rate in India is 21 per thousand (2014) and the fertility rate is 3 per thousand (2014). Death rate in India is 7 per thousand (2014) and infant mortality rate is 40 per thousand (2013). Infant mortality rate for girls and boys become 42 per thousand and 39 per thousand in 2013. Maternal mortality rate is 167 per hundred thousand live births (2013). One important component of women empowerment is their rate of political participation, which actually represents their ability to influence at policymaking level. Just like higher education and occupation, the success rate of Indian women in various levels of polls, exhibits similar miserable image. Only 11 percent women are found to be elected in 2013 parliamentary election and about 10 percent women are elected in Rajya Sabha in the year 2012 (Table 5). In state assembly election within 2008–2013. Percentage of elected women are zero to 14 percent in different states of India.

What is observed

About 74.4 percent women of 124385 women are Hindus (Table 1). Among the rest, about 14.1 percent are from other religions and 13.5 percent are Muslim women. Again, Indian society is stratified into several caste groups namely General, OBC (other backward classes), SC (Scheduled Castes) and ST (scheduled Tribes). By caste distribution, 36 percent of women belongs to general castes; rests are OBC (33 percent), SC (17 percent) and ST (14 percent). Of the total surveyed women, only 40 percent women are employed. About 68 percent of surveyed women are literate and most of them (43

percent) have medium level education. Very few (10 percent) are highly educated (Table 1)^{24,25}. Majority of the household decisions are (Table 2) found to be taken jointly by the spouses. If decision-making ability of a female is considered separately, it is observed that very few women can take household decisions alone. Probably husbands take the leading role in household decisions, which wives have to approve in any way. Considering women's sole decision making ability as an indicator of empowerment, (Table 3) onwards show the results regarding the decisions relating to the respondent's own decisions only. As per classification of Empowerment index (EI), about 52 percent women have low level of empowerment, 41 percent have medium level and only 7 percent managed to have high level of empowerment (Table 3). However, this pattern of empowerment varies with their marital status. Indian married women living with their husband, have different degrees of empowerment in the household but lone women are bound to be satisfied with low level of empowerment only. In this regard, it is to mention that lone women exist in a very small proportion, because this is not a well-accepted form within Indian social structure. Among married women, 59 percent has medium level empowerment and very few (9 percent) possess high level of empowerment, while 35 percent of them have low-level empowerment. Above findings, ascertain the miserable condition of lone women who are willingly or forcibly become separated from their husband. Irrespective to their marital status, *lone women* have low level of empowerment. It is to examine now whether their positional status (relationship to household head) has any influence on their level of empowerment. It is found that positional status of lone women with respect to household head has no impact on their level of empowerment (Table 4) i.e. women of this group are low empowered irrespective to their marital and positional status. However, for married women, their level of empowerment is sensitive to their positional status. Among married women, about 64 percent of the 'wife of the head' cohort has medium level empowerment whereas 62 percent women from 'head' cohort has medium level empowerment. Of the rest, 50 percent women who are neither *head nor wife of the family head* found to be less empowered. Proportion of highly empowered women are very few in Indian society. Among 'married head', only 28 percent women have high level of empowerment whereas women having 'wife and other' status rarely get the opportunity to exercise high level of empowerment.

In Indian social structure, women are seldom allowed to remain unmarried. Majority (90.8 percent) of the unmarried women belongs to 15–25 years of age group. Remaining 8.5 percent belongs to 26–40 years age group and .07 percent belongs to 41–49 years age group (Table 5). Population of 15–25 age cohort mainly comprises of daughters, sisters etc. they are considered as less matured part of the family, therefore excluded from household decision-making. In the next age cohorts also majority of the population (78 percent and 70 percent) are the daughter, sister, sister-in-law etc. of the family. Only 22 percent of this population secured the position of head of the family but they also failed to exercise both medium and or high empowerment due to their marital status. In the last age cohort, 30 percent women hold the position of family head, even this positional status failed to earn medium or high level empowerment for them. Further investigation unearth the feature that apart from mobility and access to money related informations, all other crucial empowerment determining factors appeared as non-response (Table 6) for lone women. On contrary, married women respond to all sorts of decision-making queries. However, women's access to money is an important

factor for determining their level of empowerment, but its contribution is not same as financial or spending decisions. Above findings establish that women's level of empowerment varies with their marital status. There must be some reasons for this difference. To identify the causal factors a multiple regression analysis is carried on, taking into account EI as the dependent variable and religion, caste, media exposure, respondent's age, education, occupation, marital status, earning in terms of cash or kind, her relationship to household head, her economic class and the type of family she is residing (nuclear or joint) as explanatory variables. This regression is carried out both for Indian women in general as well as by their marital status separately. Marital status and earning (in cash or kind) capacity of women are found to be the most significant determinant of women empowerment. Of these two factors, marital status play the most significant role in determining empowerment. In addition, their age, relationship to household head, income group, media exposure and occupation shape their level of empowerment (Table 7).

Table 2 Distribution of women taking various household decisions (Jointly and alone) in India, 2005–06

Decision making variables	Joint decisions	Decisions taken alone
Access to and spending money decisions		
Has money for her own use	43.9	44
Have bank or savings account	17.9	17.9
Spending money	86.1a	26.8
Spending husband's earned money	70.7a	6.3
Large purchase	58.8	9
Household decisions		
Health care	67	28.1
Daily purchase	65.2	36.3
Visit family	66.7	12.5
Decision maker for using contraception	94	9.3
Mobility decisions		
Allowed to go market	91.1	59.5
Allowed to go outside village/ community	93.1	42.8
Allowed to go to health facility	96.4	53.4

Source: Extracted data from National Family Health Survey, 2005–06 Note: 'a' implies response rate is very low.

A separate multiple regression analysis by marital status is performed to identify the reasons of difference in the level of women empowerment across different marital status. It is observed that for *divorcee and separated* women, their age and relationship to household head appears as an important factor (Table 8) for a particular level of empowerment. In addition, their religion, exposure to media, earning in kind or cash and economic group have some influence on empowerment. It is to note that divorcee and separated Hindu women

secure relatively better status than their Muslim and other religious counterparts. Empowerment of widow is regulated by their exposure to media and relationship to household head. Besides, their economic class, type of earning, occupational status and religion regulate their level of empowerment. Empowerment of *unmarried* women depends on their media exposure, relationship to the household head, age, occupation and economic class. Excluding media exposure, all other factors play vital role in determining empowerment of unmarried women. In this regard, it is to note that very few women of this group remain unmarried after forty. Majority of them belongs to marriage age group and are anticipated to be married in near future. Largely, empowerment of *married* women depends on their types of earning, economic class, relationship with the head of the household, age, media exposure, occupation, religion and the type of family i.e. nuclear or joint). It is to note that the married Muslim and other religion women are more empowered than their Hindu counterpart. In the nuclear families, married women have more control on family decisions than that of residing in joint families. Further, their economic and occupational status influences the level of empowerment largely (Table 8).

Table 3 Distribution of women by marital status and empowerment level in India, 2005–06

Empowerment index (EI)	Low	Medium	High	Total
Overall	52	41.4	6.56	124364
Never Married	100	0	0	30656
Married	32.1	58.6	9.3	87909
Widow	100	0	0	3921
Divorcee	100	0	0	504
Separated	100	0	0	1374
Total	64698	51532	8134	124364

Source: Extracted data from National Family Health Survey, 2005–06.

Table 6 Distribution of Indian women by marital status & EI controlling factors, 2005–2006

EI variables	Married	Unmarried	Widow	Divorcee	Separated
Spending	26.8				
Health	28.1				
Large purchase	9				
Daily Purchase	36.3				
Visit Family	12.5				
Husband's earning	6.4				
Contraception use	9.3				
Market	61.4	50.3	82.3	74.4	77.9
Health Facility	56.9	39.2	78.2	70	74.3
Outside Village	44.9	31.7	73.5	61.3	65.7
Loan Program	38.1	36.1	40.8	36.7	42.7
Has money for her own use	43.9	40	68.3	52.6	60.4
Has bank account	18.5	14.7	29.8	21.2	19.6

Source: Extracted data from National Family Health Survey, 2005–06.

Table 4 Distribution of women by marital status, relationship to household head and empowerment in India, 2005–06

Current marital status	Relationship to household head	EI			Total
		Low	Medium	High	
Never married	Others	100			5585
	Head	100			382
Married	Others	49.6	45.8	4.7	21067
	Wife	25.9	64	10	58734
	Head	10.6	61.7	27.7	3447
Widowed	Others	100			1005
	Head	100			2557
Divorced	Others	100			88
	Head	100			137
Separated	Others	100			255
	Wife	100			4
	Head	100			529

Source: Extracted data from National Family Health Survey, 2005–06.

Table 5 Distribution of unmarried women by age in India, 2005–06

Age group	Percentage of unmarried female	Relationship to household head			
		Others	Wife	Head	Total
15–25	90.8	96.2	0	3.8	5152
26–40	8.5	78.1	0.1	21.8	689
41–49	0.7	69.8	0	30.2	126
Total	30661	5582	3	382	5967

Source: Extracted data from National Family Health Survey, 2005–06.

Table 7 Controlling factors of EI for women in India, 2005–06

Causal factors	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	T
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
Constant	-2.073	0.059		-35.250*
Media	0.332	0.012	0.109	26.670*
Respondent 's Age	0.382	0.008	0.186	47.118*
Relation to HHD Head	0.403	0.011	0.171	36.246*
Respondent's Occupation	0.129	0.009	0.058	13.569*
Respondent's Marital Status	1.22	0.008	0.59	150.967*
Respondent's Type of Earning	0.23	0.004	0.217	54.681*
WI	0.249	0.009	0.135	29.248*
Household Structure	-0.143	0.012	-0.053	-12.187*

Source: Extracted data from National Family Health Survey, 2005–06.

Note: *means significant at 01 percent level.

Table 8 Controlling factors of EI for lone women in India, 2005–06

Causal factors	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	T
	B	Std. error	Beta	
Divorcee and separated women				
Constant	2.602	0.169		15.426*
Religion	-0.074	0.023	-0.116	-3.179**
Media	0.134	0.045	0.107	2.940**
Respondent 's Age	0.11	0.03	0.128	3.6669
Relation to HHD Head	0.145	0.026	0.247	5.591*
Respondent's Type of Earning	0.065	0.023	0.102	2.880**
WI	0.093	0.03	0.124	3.092**
Widow				
Constant	2.959	0.109		27.124*
Religion	-0.068	0.016	-0.086	-4.275*
Media	0.197	0.028	0.157	7.160*
Respondent 's Age	0.042	0.021	0.041	2.036**
Relation to HHD Head	0.082	0.017	0.121	4.754*
Respondent's Occupation	0.088	0.023	0.084	3.814*
Respondent's Type of Earning	0.051	0.012	0.09	4.290*
WI	0.092	0.019	0.114	4.746*
Household Structure	-0.06	0.029	-0.052	-2.071**
Unmarried women				
Constant	1.39	0.128		10.835*
Religion	0.032	0.016	0.041	1.961**
Media	0.205	0.047	0.094	4.390*
Respondent 's Age	0.265	0.028	0.204	9.615*
Relation to HHD Head	0.18	0.024	0.177	7.593*
Respondent's Occupation	0.167	0.02	0.189	8.387*
Respondent's Type of Earning	0.055	0.012	0.096	4.419*
WI	0.17	0.022	0.184	7.917*

Table Continued...

Causal factors	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	T
	B	Std. error	Beta	
Married women				
Constant	2.566	0.048		53.879*
Religion	0.044	0.008	0.027	5.763*
Media	0.361	0.013	0.139	27.624*
Respondent's Age	0.309	0.009	0.17	35.258*
Relation to HHD Head	0.452	0.014	0.182	32.985*
Respondent's Education	0.01	0.005	0.009	1.888***
Respondent's Occupation	0.152	0.01	0.078	14.773*
Respondent's Type of Earning	0.246	0.004	0.272	56.179*
WI	0.303	0.009	0.191	33.285*
Household Structure	-0.087	0.012	-0.037	-6.998*

Source: Extracted data from National Family Health Survey, 2005–06.

Note: * Means significant at 01 percent.

**Means significant at 05 percent level.

***Means significant at 10 percent level.

What the data speaks

Above discussion substantiates that marital status is a most important determinant of women empowerment in India. Usually, lone women are excluded from family decision-making; only married women living with their husband are entitled to take part in family decision-making. From data, it appears that the spouses jointly take most of the household decisions, but the actual contribution of women in joint decisions becomes a debatable issue. If they are actively involved in the family decision making then it would have been reflected in the percentage of women taking all the household decisions alone, but in reality, percentage of those are found in a modest amount. Probably, the husbands take the leading role in making household decisions, which wives have to approve ultimately. Therefore, to obtain the factual level of women empowerment, we concentrate only on the decisions solely taken by them. It is to note that in Indian society percentage of lone women is small because this form is not supported by its social norms. Therefore, married women constitute the substantial part of the society. They have varying degree of empowerment at the household level, though very few of them possess high level of empowerment. In orthodox male dominated society, women are seemingly recognized by their marital status but not by their level of education or employment, indicating that social factors are stronger than the economic factors. Among social factors, it is important to know, whether the respondent's relationship to the head of the household influences anyway their level of empowerment. Noticeable fact is that, empowerment of married women varies with their positional status, but empowerment of lone women is not affected by this status anyway. Usually married women have medium level of empowerment, while lone women have low level of empowerment irrespective of their marital and positional status in the household. This observation corroborates the poor status of lone women who are forcibly or willingly not living with their husband. As an explanation it can be said that, obeying Indian social norms, very small population of women remain unmarried, of them 91percent belongs to 15–25 years age signifying that they are waiting to be married in near future.

Nevertheless, less than 10 percent in 26–40 years age cohort and fewer women in 41–49 years age cohort remain unmarried. It can be assumed that women of the last age cohort remained unmarried due to some compulsion; otherwise, they may have been married. Women of 15–40 age groups mainly possess the status of daughter (s) or sister (s) or others of the family. Considered as unimportant, they are excluded from the household decision-making. Even, headship status of unmarried women cannot fetch medium/high level of empowerment for them. Further minute research reveals that for lone women, most of the crucial empowerment determining factors appeared as non-response. For them responses are available only for mobility freedom and access to money related information. Reasons for such non-response may be either lack of awareness on the part of respondents or exclusion of respondents from the access to power for taking major decisions within the family. On the contrary, responses are available for all sorts of decision related queries for married women. Argument is that marriage is mandatory for every Indian woman. It is believed to be a sacred relation and cannot be terminated due to any personal ground. Such conception instigate one to unwelcome lone women and their autonomy in family as well as in the society. There is always a tendency to corner them. They are deliberately excluded from the confidence generating activities like participating in the financial decisions (spending, large purchase, daily purchase); health related and mobility related decisions. At the same time, being a primary earner, male member of the family cannot always manage time; therefore, they have to provide some freedom to the women in the family particularly the freedom of mobility. However, mobility freedom cannot be a vital factor for achieving real empowerment. NFHS 3 provides information relating to access to money but not about its use. However, from empowerment point of view, information regarding access to money is more important than mobility freedom, but its status is not the same as financial/ spending decisions. Among lone women, divorcee and separated women are usually subject to defamation that push them towards low empowerment. Commonly, widows do not have much decent status in Indian society but they are little better off than divorcee and separated women. Reason may be

that they are accepted somehow in the society for being unwillingly widow and therefore receive some sympathy (not empowerment). It is established that marital status significantly influence empowerment of women. Therefore, effect of other socio economic factors on empowerment is examined separately by marital status. For divorcee, separated and widow, their relation to the household head and their economic status acts as an important determinant of empowerment. Among other factors, religion, exposure to media, earning in kind or cash have some influence on their empowerment. By religion, empowerment status of Hindu divorcee and separated women is better than Muslim and other religion women. Similarly Hindu widow are more empowered than non-Hindu widows. Maybe some of the Hindu divorced or separated or widow women earn for their sustenance, which provide them relatively more mental support. However, exposure to media, age, relation to household head, occupation, and economic class has significant effect on empowerment of unmarried women. May be, a good number of the unmarried women belongs to the potentially married age cohort among which very few remain unmarried after the age of forty (Table 7). Except a few, this set consists of the daughters/sisters within a family, and consequently their occupation does not help much to gain moderate/high empowerment. For married women all of the selected factors like religion, household structure, age, media exposure, relation to household head, education, occupation, type of earning, economic class and have strong influence on their empowerment. Probably, married women have to adjust with various odds in their married life so their empowerment depends on numerous factors.

Conclusion

Millennium Development Goals (MDG) goals were set on the beginning of this century and target was set to fulfill those goals within 2015. Among those, third MDG goal promised to ensure gender equality and empower women. After termination of MDG it is important to know how far third MDG is fulfilled. However, study exhibits a gloomy picture of empowerment scenario of Indian women still now. Study show that more than 50 percent women have low level of empowerment, 41 percent have medium level of empowerment and very few (7 percent) achieve high level of empowerment in India. This is an overall picture of empowerment, and it is already established that women empowerment depends on various socio-economic factors. In India, social factors are stronger than economic factors because the country has some strict social rules and regulations. One of such norms is related to marriage where marriage is considered as a powerful institution and mandatory for everyone particularly for girls. Marriage is supposed to provide settlement, security, respect, completeness and confidence to a woman in the society. This belief sometime generates lack of confidence among unmarried women. They often face insecurity and seldom get due respect in the society. Similarly, widow, divorcee and separated women rarely get respect in the society. This indicates that the status of women largely spins around her marital status in India. The studies on empowerment show that the education of women has great control on achieving more empowerment, but our study demonstrate that in orthodox Indian society, the effect of marital status nullify the role of education on empowerment. This explicates the reasons for lone women's lower empowerment, even their headship status cannot fetch them higher empowerment. Probably the reason lies in the fallacy of functional and social headship. The general rule in Indian society is that the senior person will be the head of the family, but this does not mean that he/she takes active part in decision-making. It may happen that

these women are non-functioning head, which is one of the reasons behind their low empowerment. Hence, special attention must be paid to unmarried, widow, and divorcee and separated or deserted women while formulating policies in favor of women. Not only marriage but also staying happily with their husband is another social concept related to the well-being of women. This socially constructed traditional concept is injected among the girls from their childhood in such a way that they internalize the importance of marriage. This edifies women to bear all sorts of misdeeds of their in-laws including husband in order to sustain their marriage. In this social background, considering lone women as rebel against patriarchy they are assigned low status in the society thereby restraining them from obtaining medium or high empowerment in the family. Positive campaign may convince or help to change the view of the society about lone (unmarried, widow, divorcee and separated) women. If the problem is treated from the root while adopting pro-women policies and programmes, then only it will be possible to achieve the third millennium goal because mainstream gender policies hardly penetrates within a household. Hence, instead of treating women as a group separate attention should be paid to the problems of lone women and married women. Empowerment of lone women along with married women (staying with their husband) may help to achieve development for women as a whole.²⁵

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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