



Article Type: Research Article

Article Ref. No.: 20103100403LF

<https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2021-0301-a003>



LEVEL OF AUTONOMY AMONG MUSLIM WOMEN BY MARITAL STATUS AND PLACE OF RESIDENCE IN BIRBHUM DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL

Munshi Md Amin¹, Dipika Subba²✉

Abstract:

The paper attempts to examine the level of autonomy among Muslim women in the Birbhum District of West Bengal. Further, it also tries to analyse the variation in the level of autonomy based on marital status and place of residence. The study is based on a primary survey. 12 villages and 4 municipal areas of Birbhum district have been selected and a sample of 664 has been surveyed based on stratified random sampling. Further, focus group discussion has also been conducted in the study area. To examine the level of autonomy among Muslim women, autonomy index has been computed. Three parameters i.e. gender space discrimination, mobility and decision making authority have been considered in computing autonomy index. The finding indicates the significant variation in the level of autonomy by marital status and place of residence. Unmarried women are less discriminated and are allowed to go out from home more frequently as compared to married women in both rural and urban areas. However, in the case of decision-making authority, married women enjoy more autonomy but it is significant only in rural areas. Thus, the paper highlights that the increase in the educational level and exposure to the outer world will help in improving the level of autonomy among Muslim women. Further, it also suggests that there is a need for a specific empowerment programme in the study area so that they could be enabled to challenge the traditional norms and access community resources.

Keywords: Gender space discrimination, Mobility, Decision making authority

1.0 Introduction:

Autonomy is the ability to make a decision about one's concern and have access to material resources (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Dixon, 1978). It varies across regions and social-cultural contexts. The variation in the autonomy level by place of residence, marital status, religion, caste, income do exist (Jejeebhoy, 2000; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). Women in general and Muslim women, in particular, have very low autonomy (Morgan et al., 2002). The gender discrimination and strong dominance of the patriarchy system over women is the primary feature of Indian Muslim culture (Engineer, 1994). Muslim women, in general, are deprived of the right to live independently and are always excluded from all the rights (United Nation Human Rights, 2014). They are usually excluded from all inheritance and succession customs. On the contrary, Muslim men enjoy dominance over properties and assets inherited from their ancestors (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). The 2009 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development (UN DESA, 2009) has mentioned that there are positive reflections in social and economic development when women enjoy equal rights in the economy and financial resources to the same extent as men do. Prof. Amartya Sen (1999) in his book 'Development as Freedom' states that the engagement of women in the economy

1 [Author] Assistant Professor, Fakir Chand College, Diamond Harbour, South 24 Parganas, 743331, West Bengal, INDIA

2 [Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Assistant Professor, Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, Panchanan Nagar, Vivekananda Street, Cooch Behar, 736101, West Bengal, INDIA. E-mail: subba.dipika@gmail.com



benefits society. The social benefits should be provided to women by improving their social status and freedom of movement.

A myth that we must address and discard the principle of the assumption that empowerment is necessary only for rural women. While it is true that in some ways urban women are in better condition compared to their rural counterparts (Pateman, 2011). This simplistic compartmentalisation into rural powerless and urban power holders assumes that urban women do not need empowerment; because they have got it for granted. This concept is of course incorrect because the way gender issue affects rural women is the same for urban women as well. Women can only be empowered if society works to reduce gender bias in decision-making process in the family and have the opportunity to generate income (United Nations, 2010). It is well known that the empowerment of women generates a positive response to the community's progress. Empowerment cannot be directly observable; conversely, it may be valued differently depending on the subjective views of individuals.

The present paper aims to examine the level of autonomy among Muslim women in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. The assessment has been made through analysing the autonomy index calculated from the data collected from the field. Further, an attempt has also been made to find out the variation in the level of autonomy by their marital status and the place of residence.

2.0 Materials and Methods:

The area selected for the study is the Birbhum district of West Bengal and is based on a primary survey. Out of total 19 blocks in the Birbhum district, 12 blocks were selected for the study based on the percentage of Muslim households with more than 20 percent. From selected sample blocks, 12 villages with more than 100 Muslim households were selected but avoided villages that are very close to each other. Similarly, out of 6 municipal areas in the study area, 4 have been selected to collect data from urban areas. From each municipal area, four wards with a minimum of 50 Muslim households have been selected. The data has been generated by interviewing Muslim women in the sample villages and municipal areas through a systematically prepared questionnaire. A total no. of 664 samples has been selected for the study. Further, 16 focus groups were also conducted to discuss the issues of Muslim women.

To examine the level of autonomy among Muslim women in the study area autonomy index has been computed. The autonomy index has been computed taking into consideration the three parameters i.e. gender space discrimination index, mobility index, and decision making authority index. The gender-space discrimination index has been computed from eight aspects, i.e., 1) participation in social events, 2) participation in political gathering, 3) visit to the restaurants 4) visit to the markets and community centres 5) visit to the street-side tea stalls, coffee shops etc., 6) visit to the clubs and community centres, 7) visit to the parks and recreation centres and 8) report to the Police Station in need. Each of the items bears the value '0' for escorted by someone and value 1 for none. Thus, the Index value ranges from 0 to 8 which indicate higher the value higher will be the autonomy. Similarly, to calculate mobility index among Muslim women seven items have been selected. These are: 1) freedom of going outside at night, 2) participate in the social events, 3) visit markets/community centres, 4) visit any friend's residence, 5) report to administrative places like the offices of Panchayat, Municipality, Block, S.D.O etc., 6) attend the health centre in the case of emergency including medical check-up and 7) visit neighbour's family. The score here ranges from 0 to 7. Further, decision-making authority index has also been computed taking the following six aspects. 1) Choosing education and related issues, 2) health care, 3) choosing a career, 4) freedom to purchase personal materials, 5) purchase of major belongings for the family and 6) exercise control over the expenditure of the family. The index value ranges between '0' indicating that she cannot participate in any decision making authority

to value 6 indicating she can participate in all 6 decision-making authorities. Finally, the autonomy index has been calculated taking into consideration all three indices.

Further, Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk techniques have been tested to check if the data is normally distributed or not. Appropriate statistical techniques have been followed to check the significance of the output. Thus, to compare the existence of any significant difference in mean in autonomy level among Muslim women in the study area by marital status and place of residence 'Mann-Whitney U' test has been conducted.

3.0 Results:

Level of autonomy among Muslim women: Table 1 shows the indices of autonomy among Muslim women in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. It shows the distribution of variables in each index i.e. gender space discrimination index, mobility index and decision making authority index. In gender space discrimination index, a large percentage of Muslim women i.e. around 99 percent reported that they are not allowed to go to clubs and community centres, followed by 94 percent not allowed to go to a nearby stall. However, around 40 percent reported attending any social events followed by 28.5 percent visit to the market. Similarly, in case of mobility index, 70 percent reported visiting neighbour house unescorted, which indicates that there are still around 30 percent Muslim women who are not even allowed to go neighbour house alone. In the case of decision making index around 33 percent can decide on their own to visit the health centre whereas only 21.5 percent can make their career decision.

The mean value for each of the three dimensions of autonomy indicates a very low level of autonomy among Muslim women (Table 1). The maximum score of gender discrimination index is 9 and the mean value is 1.59. Similarly, in the case of mobility index and decision making authority index, maximum values are 7 and 6 whereas the mean values are 2.52 and 1.65 respectively.

Furthermore, looking at the overall autonomy index which incorporates all the three dimensions of autonomy i.e. gender space discrimination index, mobility index and decision making authority index, it has been observed that around 73.33 percentage of women do not have any autonomy. The mean score is 5.6 with a maximal value of 21.

Table 1: Level of autonomy among Muslim women in Birbhum District

Autonomy Index	Responses (n-664)	Percentage of Responses
Gender Space Discrimination Index		
Attend any Social Event	273	39.66
Take part in Political gathering	89	12.66
Visit Restaurants	130	18.09
Visit Markets	197	28.51
Visit Street side Tea Stalls /Coffee Shops	46	6.64
Visit clubs and Community Centres	14	1.81
Visit Parks/Recreation Centres	97	13.42
Report Police Station in need	161	23.53
Total Respondents frequency of responses	1001	
Gender-Space Discrimination Index (Mean value)	1.51	
Standard deviation value	1.587	
Mobility Index		
Freedom of going Outside at Night	127	19.16
Participate in the Social Event	263	39.67
Visit Market/Community Centres	189	28.51
Visits any Friends residence	246	37.1
Report to Administrative Places like Panchayat, Block Office, S.D.O office etc.	219	33.03

Visits Health centre for a health check-up	159	23.98
Visits to Neighbour family	467	70.44
Total Respondents frequency of responses	1670	
Mobility Index (Mean value)	2.52	
Standard deviation value	1.913	
Decision Making Authority Index		
Choosing Education and related issues	207	31.22
Health care	219	33.03
Choosing Career	143	21.57
Choosing freedom to purchase personal materials	205	30.92
Purchase of major belongings for the family	156	23.53
Exercise control over the expenditure of the family	164	24.74
Total Respondents frequency of responses	1094	
Decision-Making Authority Index (Mean value)	1.65	
Standard deviation value	1.877	
Autonomy Index		
Total		
Autonomy Index (Mean value)	5.68	
Standard deviation value	4.419	

Source: Data computed from field survey (Sept. 2019 to February 2020)

Level of autonomy among Muslim women by marital status: Table No. 2 represents the Autonomy Indices based on marital status in Birbhum District. The three dimensions of autonomy such as gender space discrimination, mobility, and decision making authority are computed among married and unmarried Muslim women to examine the variation in the autonomy by marital status. The analysis indicates that the mean value of gender space discrimination index is higher among unmarried Muslim women (Index value 1.83) as compared to married women (Index Value-1.20). This indicates that unmarried women are less discriminated against as compared to married women. Further, the analysis also shows that mobility is higher among unmarried women (Index value-2.68) than married women (Index value-2.35). However, in the case of decision making authority, married Muslim women enjoy higher authority (Index value-1.75) than unmarried women (Index value-1.56).

Further, to check the existence of any significant variation of autonomy among married and unmarried women Mann-Whitney U statistic has been computed. Since the data is not normally distributed, the Mann-Whitney U statistical technique has been used. It has been observed that the significant differences in the mean value between married and unmarried women by the level of autonomy indices exist and are significant at (0.05) level of significance. The unmarried women are less discriminated ($p=0.000$) and have higher mobility ($p=0.034$), whereas in the case of decision making authority married women enjoy more autonomy ($p=0.045$). However, it has also been observed that when the overall level of autonomy is considered no significant differences in the mean value of autonomy among married (mean value-5.30) and unmarried Muslim women (mean value-6.06) exist in the study area ($p=0.102$).

Table 2: Level of autonomy among Muslim women by marital status

Marital Status		Gender Space Discrimination Index	Mobility Index	Decision Making Authority Index	Autonomy Index
Unmarried	Mean (SD)	1.83 (1.788)	2.68 (1.976)	1.56 (1.886)	6.07 (4.373)
Married	Mean (SD)	1.20 (1.284)	2.35(1.837)	1.75(1.865)	5.3 (4.878)
Mann-Whitney U Test		0.000***	0.034**	0.045**	0.102

Significant level: ** 0.05 level of Significance, *** 0.01 level of significance (Source: Data computed from field survey (Sept. 2019 to February 2020))

Level of autonomy among Muslim women by place of residence: Analysing the existence of any variation in the level of autonomy by place of residence among Muslim women it has been observed that the mean value of all the three indices of autonomy is higher in urban areas as compared to rural (Table 3). In the case of gender space discrimination index and mobility index, the obtained 'p' value at (0.05) significant level with 332 degrees of freedom is 0.00 and 0.026. This indicates that there exists a significant difference in autonomy among Muslim women by place of residence. However, in the case of decision making authority, no significant variation in the mean value by place of residence exists. Considering the overall autonomy index it has been observed that the level of autonomy among Muslim women is greater in urban areas as compared to its counterpart and the level is significant at 0.05 level of significance ($p=0.019$).

Table 3: Level of autonomy among Muslim women by Place of Residence

Place of Residence		Gender Space Discrimination Index	Mobility Index	Decision Making Authority Index	Autonomy Index
Rural	Mean (SD)	1.35 (1.514)	2.32 (1.712)	1.58 (1.815)	4.51 (3.520)
Urban	Mean (SD)	1.67 (1.643)	2.71 (2.077)	1.72 (1.937)	5.14 (3.636)
Mann-Whitney U Test		0.000***	0.026**	0.468	0.032**

Significant level: **0.05 level of significance, *** 0.01 level of significance (Source: Data computed from field survey (Sept. 2019 to Feb 2020))

Further, an attempt has also been made to examine the variation in the level of autonomy among married and unmarried women by place of residence. The analysis indicates that no significant variation in the level of autonomy among married and unmarried women exists in both rural ($p=0.43$) and urban areas ($p=0.09$). Although, the gender space discrimination index and mobility index indicate a higher autonomy level among unmarried women both in the case of rural and urban areas and are significant. On the other hand, decision-making authority is higher among married women but it is significant only in rural areas.

Table 4: Level of autonomy among married and unmarried women by place of residence

Marital Status		Gender Space Discrimination Index	Mobility Index	Decision Making Authority Index	Autonomy Index
Rural Area					
Unmarried	Mean (SD)	1.61(1.722)	2.56(1.815)	1.48(1.791)	5.54(3.530)
Married	Mean (SD)	1.08(1.221)	2.14(1.593)	1.69(1.838)	4.95(3.972)
Mann-Whitney U Test		0.009***	0.034**	0.045**	0.432
Urban Area					
Unmarried	Mean (SD)	2.04(1.832)	2.90(2.108)	1.64(1.815)	6.58(4.689)
Married	Mean (SD)	1.32(1.338)	2.56(2.037)	1.81(1.895)	5.65(4.336)
Mann-Whitney U Test		0.001***	0.026**	0.185	0.090

Significant level: ** 0.05 level of significance, *** 0.01 level of significance (Source: Data computed from field survey (Sept. 2019 to February 2020))

5.0 Discussion:

The analysis indicates that the level of autonomy is very low among Muslim women in the Birbhum district. The variations in the autonomy level by marital status do exist in the study area. Unmarried women are less discriminated and are allowed to go out from home alone as compared to married Muslim women. This could be due to the increase in the level of attainment of higher education among Muslim women (Macclendon et al., 2018). The unmarried Muslim women have to go to schools, colleges, coaching centres as a result of which their tendency to go to different places has increased. Nowadays, the urge to go to the training centre and learn to work for

establishing career has increased among them. They have to go to various administrative offices and banks as per the need for scholarships and other work. At the same time, the tendency to go to recreation places or restaurants in an allied way has increased (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013). However, in the case of decision making authority in Muslim society, the participation of married women is more than unmarried women and is statistically significant. A similar finding was observed in the study conducted by Khatwani (2017). The reason for this can be said that if we look at the structural aspects of society, the responsibility of married women in the decision-making process is naturally high to a great extent. Although the obtained mean difference of overall autonomy of unmarried women is higher than married women, it is not statistically significant.

Further, the analysis also indicated that urban Muslim women enjoy more autonomy as compared to the women of rural areas. A similar finding is observed in the study conducted by Jeejebhoy, 2000 and Rajjak, 2015. It is also found that in both rural and urban areas unmarried women are less discriminated against and have high mobility, however, their levels are comparatively better in urban areas. This is mainly because women in urban areas are more exposed to the outer world, they are more educated and aware than rural Muslim women. Muslim women from urban areas compared to rural areas have more opportunities to explore their life, so they have more mobility autonomy (Jeejebhoy, 2000; Rajjak, 2015). On the other hand, women in rural areas have to live under more restrictions. However, it is also interesting to observe that married women enjoy more autonomy in decision making in rural areas and the differences among married and unmarried women are significant but no such significant differences in the level of decision making autonomy exist among Muslim women in urban areas by their marital status. This could be because the unmarried women in rural areas are less educated and have less experience in life so their opinions are less considered whereas in the case of urban areas women irrespective of their marital status are less discriminated against and have equal participation in the decision-making process. Thus, no such significant differences in the decision-making authority exist in the urban area. In simple words, it can be said that in urban areas irrespective of marital status women enjoy equal decision making autonomy.

In the focus group discussion, it became clear that women, particularly the young unmarried and educated women are aware of the existence of gender-space discrimination, discrimination in decision-making power and other aspects of autonomy. The women of the young generation said that they don't get an equal chance to go to the place as they would wish. They pointed out that the opportunities for women are kept restricted by elderly people. The newly married women and young unmarried women were also found strictly restricted to attend any open mind discussion among them. The young women, as well as the elderly women, said that their movements and activities were kept strictly under vigil by in-law's for some years after their marriage. The people would criticise if a woman, be it unmarried or newly married, speak openly on the streets.

One of the respondents mentioned that the male member in the house would say "I will bring all the household items from the market but I won't allow my wife to go out of the house".

Another married Muslim woman said, "I am not allowed to go out of the house or go to the nearest market without my husband and in-laws consent".

On the other hand, aged Muslim women also mentioned that due to the increasing incidence of immodest activities in the park, they forbid their daughters to visit. Further, they also mentioned that due to the lack of women clubs in their area there is no point to go in the public places.

Many elderly women also maintain that it would look very indecent for a young unmarried girl to go outside their home before marriage.

By analysing the information collected through focus group discussion it has been observed that by and large Muslim women irrespective of their marital status has to face many restrictions and obstacles from the family and the society throughout their lifespan.

6.0 Conclusion:

From this study, it appears that women in Muslim society under the strong traditional pressure face certain binding which is not easy to eliminate. The study helps to understand the need to improve the level of autonomy among Muslim women in the study area irrespective of their marital status and place of residence. The women alone may not succeed in fighting this battle in society. There require compassion and co-operation from the male members of the family. Proper education may give the women the sense and courage for self-dependence and confidence which is evident in the urban areas of the study area. Further, an implementation of a specific empowerment programme can also enable Muslim women to improve their status in society.

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