

Economic Dimension and Empowerment among Rural and Urban Women in Nepal: Analysis from 2016 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey

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Abstract

Economic background is taken as one of the crucial influencing factors of women's empowerment. This paper attempts to assess the key economic features of women and their degree of association on empowerment by place of residence. For this, the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey, 2016 data were used. In total, 9,875 currently married women aged 15-49 years were used to analyze by applying descriptive and bivariate analysis techniques. The findings showed rural women have poor economic status compared with urban women. Agriculture is the main profession of women among both rural and urban areas but the non-agricultural profession is lower especially among rural (11.7%) women to compare with urban (24.6%) women. Similarly, unpaid work seems still prevalent in both urban (46.6%) and rural (59.6%) areas. The male domination is clearly observed in earning a position with their husband, being paid in the same job, and ownership of property related to land and house. The study showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between working women and their empowerment in both rural and urban areas. The better economic status of women has higher empowerment in comparison to the women who have poor status. Hence, economic power has an automatically positive influence on women's empowerment. However, it needs to be paid high attention to improve the prevailing poor women's economic status in different circumstances.

Keywords: bivariate analysis, economic status, rural and urban residence, unpaid work, women empowerment

Introduction

Women's empowerment has been representing a wide range of concepts. It emerged from the gender stratification system and social norms and values which

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governed women in powerless positions in the society (Mason & Smith, 2003). Hence, empowerment is particularly substance with women. Klasen (2004) stated that promoting female empowerment is an integral part of well-being in society. Women's empowerment is a dynamic process (Mahmud et al., 2012) and it may be described and defined as in local terms in the society and may not be similar in various times and places. The indicators of women's empowerment can be identified as multidimensional phenomena and interrelations among different dimensions and contextually relevant (Asaolu et al., 2018; Mahmud et al., 2012; Malhotra et al., 2002; Mason & Smith, 2003). Women may have power and influence in some areas of their lives but lack autonomy in others. For example, a woman might be economically independent but sexually submissive to her husband (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; O'Neil et al., 2014). Similarly, Narayan-Parker (2005) highlights the context like time, place, socio-cultural settings which can also be important in determining the extent of empowerment at the household or individual level.

Women's empowerment is taken as a major development priority in the national and international development agenda. It is considered as a global, regional, and national goal in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Nairobi Summit on the twenty-fifth anniversary of International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 2019, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in 2020 which are energetically leading the women's empowerment around the globe (UNFPA, 2020). SDGs emphasized the commitments made in the ICPD, Beijing Platform, and Nepal is also committed to being part of the global Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2017).

Empowerment is a concern with agency and voice and acquiring knowledge, power, and experience related to the citizens (Bennett, 2002; Schuler et al., 1996). Similarly, Malhotra et al. (2002) highlighted women's empowerment is concerned with development goals and it is an important means to other ends and can cover social justice and human welfare. Kabeer (2005) conceptualized empowerment as the "ability to make strategic life choices". She indicated that economic-based poverty leads them disempowerment or denial of choice because the inability to meet basic needs results in dependence on powerful others. She also highlighted the people where to live is one of the important parameters to make the ability to their strategic life choices. She explores agency as the central concept of empowerment among three empowerment dimensions: Agency, Resources (medium through which agency is exercised), and Achievements (outcomes of agency). She explains that it comprises the 'decision making' including other forms of observable action. Thus, it seems though empowerment can be observed in terms of different dimensions, the economic

background seems one of the crucial important parts to evaluate empowerment in the different settings of rural and urban areas.

The Decision-making power of women is considered as the main indicator of empowerment while taking women's empowerment (Bayissa et al., 2018; Haque et al., 2011; Rahman, 2013). There may be different multiple factors like demographic, social, psychological, cultural economic, political, and legal which can influence and shape women's empowerment (Chaudhary et al., 2012; Kabeer, 2005; O'Neil et al., 2014). Though the individual choices and decision-making are strongly influenced by the nature of the ideological systems and the process of socialization (Mason & Smith, 2003), the economic position of women is an important part of their decisions. Habib et al. (2019) identified that economically strong and financially independent women can lead them to empowerment. Therefore, the economic dimension takes a central position in this study. Although the economic dimension is very broad in scope, the economic characteristics are specified and supposed to be as economic security (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra et al., 2002) of women as working status, timing of earning, ownership of property (land and house), earning and paid position (Bayissa et al., 2018; Malhotra et al., 2002; Narayan-Parker, 2005), bank account and wealth index in this study. Women's empowerment is measured from women's participation in household decision-making in their health care, large household purchases, and visits to family and/or relatives (Ministry of Health Nepal et al., 2017). Hence, the objective of this study is to assess the association between economic dimension and empowerment in rural and urban areas.

Method

Data Source

This study uses the publicly available data following the standard MEASURE DHS guidelines. It is a most recent cross-sectional and national representative survey, Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) conducted in 2016, implemented by New ERA under the aegis of the Ministry of Health (MOH). The total sample size was 12,862 women aged 15-49 years and after applying the weight, 9,875 currently married women were used in this study to assess the particular association between economic characteristics and women's empowerment in rural and urban residence.

Study Variables

The dependent variable for this study is binary response whether the women are empowered, or not empowered. Firstly, it was recorded each decision-making option related to who usually participates in household decision making in 1) own health care 2) large household purchases; and 3) visiting family or relatives. The response options were: 1) respondent alone; 2) respondent and husband/partner; 3) respondent and other

people; 4) husband/partner alone; 5) someone else; 6) other. The value of 1 is assigned if the response was (1), (2), or (3), that is, involvement of the respondent in decision making, or else 0, for no involvement of the respondent. Secondly, empowered and not empowered was made from a composite index of these three types of decisions and recode the index 0 (no involvement in any decision) known as not empowered and 1 2 3 (involvement in any one or two or all three decisions) which is assigned 1 and recognized empowered. Similarly, the independent variables selected based on theoretical and empirical significance such as occupation, working condition in the last 12 months, earning status, types of earning, ownership of land and house, earning a position with husband, paid status in the same job, bank account, wealth index. Independent variables have been recorded and regrouped from the data file to make a meaningful analysis.

Data Analysis

Initially, descriptive analysis is used to describe the respondents' economic characteristics in rural and urban areas. There may have various factors that affect women's empowerment. This study intends to evaluate the economic dimension and household decision-making (empowerment). So, the analysis is limited to identifying the degree of association between mentioned dependent and independent variables in rural and urban areas. Chi square test is performed to perceive the significance of the association between these two variables.

Results and Discussion

This section deals with the association of the economic status of women and their empowerment. Firstly, it describes the women's economic characteristics namely, occupation, the status of working during the last 12 months, earning duration and payment status to their work, ownership of land and house, payment status of women in comparison with men in the same job, earning comparison to their husband, having bank account status and household wealth index. Then the chi-square test is performed to see the significance between such economic characteristics and empowerment.

Economic Characteristics of Women by Place of Residence

The availability of infrastructure facilities and socio-economic development is advanced in urban areas to compare with rural areas (Subedi, 2014). So the economic status of people may also have different according to the place of residence. Table 1 presents some economic characteristics of currently married women aged 15-49 years by the place of residence. The study found that agriculture is the main profession among both rural and urban areas but the number of the non-agriculture profession

is poor especially rural women possibly due to a lack of education and a tradition of working in agriculture (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2014). It was slightly more than one-tenth (11.7%). The percentage of women involved in this profession in an urban area is only one-fourth of the women. It indicates the issue that the history of the continuous (re)creation of the objective and subjective structures of masculine domination in the society as explained by Bourdieu (2001). According to him, the continuous reproduction of masculine domination and hierarchies at occupational sectors is occurring age to age.

More women were currently working in the last 12 months than not working in both rural and urban areas although it was slightly higher (60.3%) among rural women to compare with urban women (58%). Similarly, earning in all the year but the condition seems reverse in season /occasion between rural and urban areas. For earning, 52 percent of women were involved all year in an urban area, however, an equal percentage of women were found in seasonal/occasional earning in the rural area.

Women's involvement in unpaid work seems still prevalent in both urban and rural areas. Women in rural areas were found as more unpaid workers (59.6%) which is a similar situation (64%) obtained from the 2011 census in Nepal (Shakya, 2014) in comparison to urban women (46.6%). Only one-fourth of women get the cash among rural women whereas more than two-fifths (43.3%) of women can get cash in the urban. The difference clearly prevails rural women have poor earning status compared with urban women. Similarly, the women's property owned related to land and house was found 15 and 11 percent respectively in urban and it was 11 and 6 percent among rural women. This result is consistent with the finding shown in 2011 census (Shakya, 2014). She added this situation is happening because of the tradition of passing the land from a father to son and because of that, women lag even though there are laws that entitle women to property rights.

The male-dominated position is clearly observed in earnings. More than three fourth (75.5%) of women earn less than their husbands among urban women. It can be clear from the presented data that 70 percent of women were paid less than men in the same work in that area. In a rural area, more than four-fifths (81.0%) of women earn less than their husbands. It is portrayed as silent and passive victims of a patriarchal system and women often internalize dominant values to their subordination (Kabeer, 1998). Likewise, the study found that 52 percent among urban women and 36 percent of rural women have a bank account. Reverse household wealth index status was found among urban and rural women. It was a low percentage (10.7%) women were in poorest household wealth index and richest was high (30.4%) in the urban area and it was the reverse situation in the rural area i.e, 27.7 percent were poorest and 5.5percent were richest.

Table 1

Percentage distribution of economic characteristics of women by place of residence

Economic characteristics	Types of the place of residence			
	Urban		Rural	
	%	N	%	N
Occupation				
Not working	32.6	1966	30.6	1176
Non-Agriculture	24.6	1482	11.7	449
Agriculture	42.8	2583	57.7	2219
Worked in last 12 months				
Not currently working	42.0	2535	39.7	1526
Currently working	58.0	3496	60.3	2318
Total	100.0	6031	100.0	3844
Women earning status				
All year	51.6	2096	47.9	1279
Seasonal/occasional	48.4	1968	52.1	1389
Type of earnings from respondent's work				
Unpaid	46.6	1893	59.6	1590
Cash only	43.3	1758	24.6	657
Cash and kind	10.2	413	15.8	422
Total	100.0	4064	100.0	2669
Owns a land				
Does not own	84.7	5108	89.5	3439
Alone and Jointly	15.3	923	10.5	405
Owns a house				
Does not own	88.9	5359	94.0	3615
Alone and Jointly	11.1	672	6.0	229
Total	100.0	6031	100.0	3844
Earning position of respondents with husband				
Less than husband	75.7	1468	81.0	742
More or about the same	24.3	470	19.9	174
Total	100.0	1938	100.0	916
Women are paid less/equal/more than men in the same job				
Less	70.2	4141	65.9	2494
Equal or more	29.8	1754	34.1	1288
Total	100.0	5895	100.0	3782

Account in a bank/financial institution				
No	48.4	2920	63.6	2447
Yes	51.6	3111	36.4	1398
Wealth index				
Poorest	10.7	644	27.1	1043
Poorer	18.0	1087	22.4	859
Middle	18.4	1108	25.5	980
Richer	22.5	1359	19.5	748
Richest	30.4	1833	5.5	214
Total	100.0	6031	100.0	3844

Source: Dataset of Nepal Demographic and Health Survey, 2016

Economic Characteristics and Empowerment of Women in Urban and Rural areas: Bivariate Analysis

Economic security is one of the key factors and it can play a positive role to increase women's empowerment. Table 2 showed there is a positive and significant relationship between working women and their empowerment in both rural and urban areas. This result is similar to the study of Thapa and Gurung (2010); Chaudhary et al. (2012); and (Bushra & Wajiha, 2015). Women who were involved in the agriculture and non-agriculture sectors are more likely empowered to compare with not working women. However, it is an important and serious issue that near or about one-third of women (Table 1) are listed as not working. The concept and documented word ‘Not working’ is disgraceful in the sense that it may be unable to cover in ‘the care economy’, where women often perform a variety of tasks for the family, such as cooking and cleaning, and may have responsibilities for adults who are sick or disabled and require extra care and household work is not considered as economic value and not count in national account system (Fox, 2016; McKineley, 2005).

Women working in non-agriculture sectors seemed high empowered in both rural and urban areas. However, rural women appeared poorly empowered in comparison with urban women in all types of professions. The result showed women's economic activity in non-agriculture is low and it is possibly due to lack of education and the tradition of working in agriculture (Faridi et al., 2009; Shakya, 2014). The result is thoughtful and needs to highlight the place of residence and structure of women’s occupation which can hit to be empowerment.

Similarly, the result showed interestingly that women's household decision-making is a significant gap between women's work in the last 12 months and not currently working in both rural and urban areas. Currently, working women were able

to get involved more in decision-making than not involved during the last 12 months. The chi-square test shows statistically significant at 1 percent level indifference both variables; women's occupation and involvement in the work in the last 12 months and empowerment at both urban and rural areas.

Likewise, women who earn the whole year are indicated more empowered than seasonal or occasional earning. It has a significant association only in an urban area. Similarly, if women with the situation to earn cash only have positive significance in association with their empowerment than the women who earn cash only, and cash and kind both. Women who were not paid in their work have poor empowerment compared with the women who get cash only, and cash and kind while involved in the work. It showed statistically significant at a 1 percent level.

The result seemed mentionable with statistically significant that women who have assets (land and house) are highly empowered in comparison to the women who do not have such assets. Approximately ninety percent of women are empowered who have assets in rural and urban areas.

The study also showed women were more empowered if they earned more than their husbands to compare with the women who earned less than their husbands in rural-urban areas. But the study found that it is a significant negative association with women who were paid less than men in the same job and empowerment. It exhibits that empowerment seems high among less paid women than men in the same job in comparison with the women who were paid more or equal., Women having a bank account have a significant positive impact on women's empowerment which is consistent with the result studied by Bushra and Wajiha (2015).

Data demonstrates that there is a different situation about women's household wealth index and empowerment in rural and urban areas. As expected, the richer and the richest wealth indexed women were more empowered than the poorer and the poorest. However, it is a quite adverse association between empowerment and wealth index in the rural area and found statistically significant at 5 percent level. It is possible to hypothesize that this situation occurred in the rural poor women as they might involve in the work outside for fulfilling their daily needs and may create the condition themselves to participate in the household decision making automatically.

Table 2

Percentage distribution of economic characteristics and empowerment of women by place of residence

Economic characteristics	Urban			Rural		
	Empowered	N	χ^2 value	Empowered	N	χ^2 value
Occupation						
Not working	72.3	1966	117.1***	53.2	1176	132.4***
Non-Agriculture	87.1	1482		79.3	449	
Agriculture	74.6	2583		69.5	2219	
Respondent worked in last 12 months						
Currently not working	73.0	2535	38.4***	56.2	1526	99.3***
Currently working	79.8	3496		71.8	2318	
Women earning status						
All year	81.3	2096	12.3***	72.1	1279	
Seasonal/occasional	76.8	1968		70.2	1389	
Type of earnings from respondent's work						
Not paid	71.6	1893	130.3***	65.7	1590	56.5***
Cash only	86.9	1758		79.7	657	
Cash and kind	80.6	413		78.1	422	
Total	79.1	4065		71.1	2668	
Owns a land alone or jointly						
Does not own	74.4	5108	114.5***	63.0	3439	98.7***
Alone and jointly	90.5	923		87.9	404	
Owns a house alone or jointly						
Does not own	75.1	5359	90.9***	64.3	3615	51.3***
Alone and jointly	91.6	672		87.6	229	
Total	76.9	6031		65.6	3844	
Earning status of respondents						
Less than husband	85.3	1468	5.5**	77.5	742	9.6***
More/about the same	89.6	470		88.0	175	
Total				79.5	916	
Women are paid less/equal/more than men in the same job						
Less	78.8	4141	23.6***	67.0	2494	3.1*
Equal/more	73.0	1754		64.1	1288	
Total	86.3	1938		66.0	3782	
Account in a Bank/financial institution						
No	66.8	2920	323.6***	57.0	2445	222.1***
Yes	86.4	3111		80.7	1398	
Wealth index						
Poorest	72.6	644	135.0***	67.7	1043	11.8**
Poorer	71.1	1087		68.7	859	
Middle	71.2	1108		64.1	980	
Richer	76.0	1359		61.8	748	
Richest	86.0	1833		64.1	214	
Total	76.9	6031		65.6	3844	

Source: Dataset of Nepal Demographic and Health Survey, 2016

Conclusion

This study highlights the women's status of economic characteristics and its association with their empowerment. Women faced significant economic challenges that limit their access to quality jobs, income, and ownership of property. Nevertheless, the study revealed the better economic position of women positively influenced women's empowerment in both rural and urban areas. However, as expected, urban women were more advanced and were able to decisions making in comparison with rural women. The situation of empowerment differs in various contexts. Rural women may have suffered from the disadvantaged and marginalized position and were guided from traditional norms and values. However, the poorer and the poorest household indexed women have more decision-making power than the richer and the richest in the rural area. It is quite the reverse in urban residence of women. It shows the context is also a considerable matter so it needs to capture the multiple realities to increase women's empowerment. -

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