Temporal and regional changes in the role of empowerment of women on her reproductive choices in India

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Empowerment is a basic right for women and is must for sustainable development of any nation. Several studies have revealed that empowerment of women has an influence on demographic and health outcomes (Dyson and Moore 1983; Mason 1986; Jejeebhoy 1991; Jejeebhoy 1995; Malhotra, Vanneman et al. 1995; Morgan and Niraula 1995; Schuler, Hasemi et al. 1997; Presser and Sen 2000; Kishor 2000; Mason and Smith 2000; Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001; MacQuarrie, Edmeades et al. 2007; Pande and Astone 2007; Edmeades, MacQuarrie et al. 2008; MacQuarrie 2008; Edmeades, Pande et al. 2008) and there are also some studies indicating the weak influence of empowerment (Morgan, Stash et al. 2002; Mumtaz and Salway 2005). In a big country like India, where vast heterogeneity is found in several demographic indicators, it is not surprising to notice that the level of empowerment of women varies widely across the regions(IIPS 2000; Kishor 2000; IIPS 2007). It be interesting to investigate whether the link between empowerment of women with the demographic issues like number of children ever born, ideal number of children and son preference etc. varies across regions and over time. The present study tries to get answers to these research questions and also tries to provide some policy guidelines.

Data and Methodology

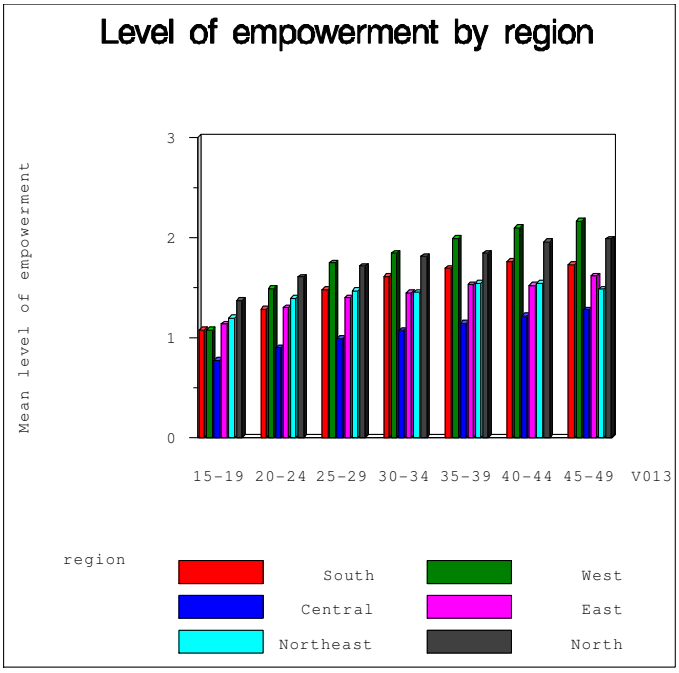
The data bases of the last two National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) i.e., NFHS-II (conducted during 1998-1999), NFHS-III (conducted during 2005-2006) have been made use of in this study. For the purpose of the present study, only the data on females who were currently married at the time of the surveys have been used. Regional classification (classification of states as the South India, the North India, the East India, the West India, the Central India and the North-east India) has been done according to the definition of the NFHS-3. An index of empowerment has been constructed based on the information on the involvement of woman in decisions regarding 1) own health care, 2) access and involvement in economic issues, 3) freedom of movement and her attitude on 4) any kind of violence against a women perpetrated by husband and attitude towards girls education etc.,(empowerment of women is not complete unless women believes that they are equal to men in all aspects and violence against them is not acceptable in any case). This index varies between 0 and 4 and it indicates the level of empowerment of woman. A woman having zero value of the index indicates that the woman is not empowered and a woman with index value equaling 4 indicates that she is fully empowered. Bivariate and multivariate analyses that include cross tabulation, multivariate regression analysis and logit regression analysis have been made use of to understand the impact of empowerment of women on her reproductive choices and her ability to achieve desired fertility. Dummy variables have been used in order to understand the variation over states within each region. Path analysis has been done to

understand the role of various socio-demographic characteristics like religion, caste etc., on fertility via the empowerment of women.

Findings and discussion

It has been found that the level of empowerment of women varies significantly across regions and over time. For example, exploration of the NFHS-III data yields the following results. The level of empowerment is the highest in the West India (except for the women in the age groups of 15-19 and 20-24). The level of the North Indian women in the stated two age groups has been the highest. As a whole, the North India and the South India have been the second and the third in terms of women empowerment. Empowerment level is the least for the women in the Central India, irrespective of age group. Figure-1 shows the level of empowerment by age group and by region.

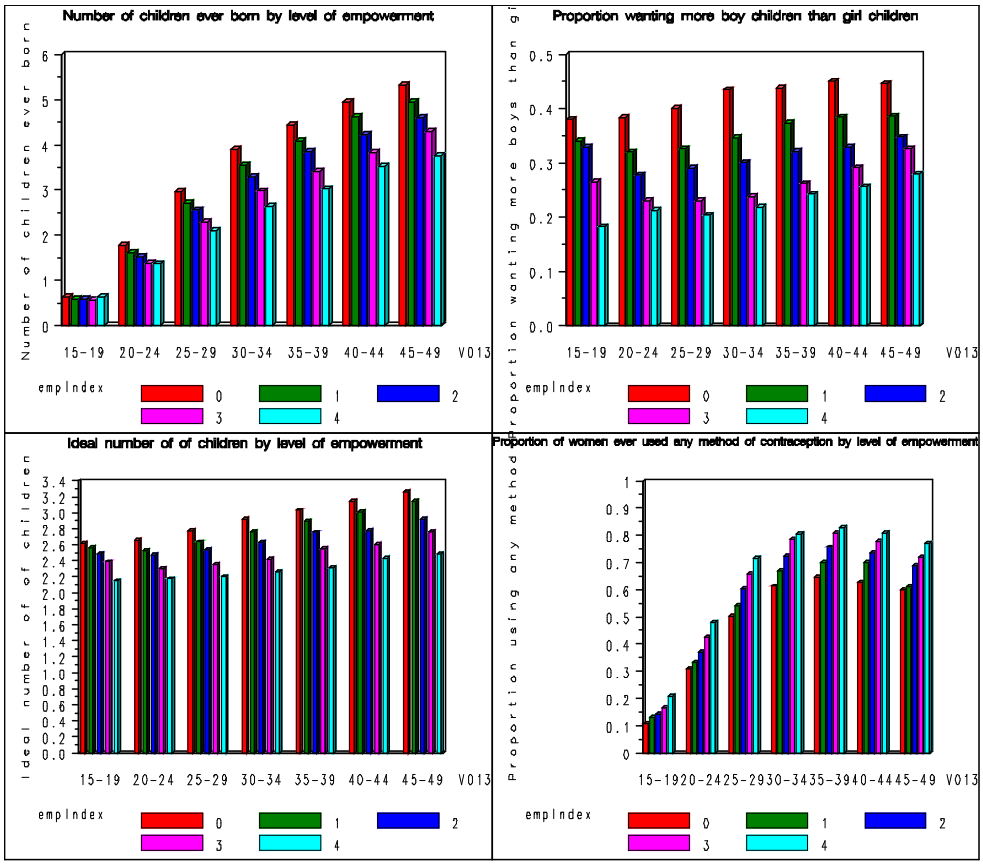
Figure-1: Level of empowerment by age group in different regions of India



At all India level, the effects of empowerment of women on the number of children ever born, ideal number of children, son preference and contraceptive usage are shown in the Figure-2. Figure-2 makes clear that the empowerment of women has an influence on all the above four aspects. Even after controlling for the effects of other factors like religion, place of residence, marital duration, age at sterilization, caste, level of education, economic condition, age gap between wife and husband, work status of female etc., the effect of empowerment on the above four aspects remains highly significant. As region wise vast heterogeneity has existed in India over various social, economic, cultural and demographic aspects the need arises in knowing whether the link of empowerment with it remain same over different regions of India or not. Answering this question will have some policy implications. The present study also attempts at knowing whether the effect of empowerment of women on the four aspects mentioned already is changing over older generations to the current ones. Some of the interesting results obtained while attempting the above problem are as follow. (1) Irrespective of region, the number children ever born decreases with the increase in the level of empowerment of women, (2) the percentage of women wanting more number of boys than girls decreases with the increase in the level of empowerment of women and (3) the percentage of women who have ever used any kind of contraceptive method increases with the increase in the level of empowerment of women. However, there are wide differentials in each of the above aspects. For example, the

gap in the number of children ever born for the females in the age group of 45-49 years who are fully empowered and that for the ones in the same age group who are not empowered is 1.98 in the North India and 0.7 in the Central India. South Indian women who are in the age group of 15-19 years and are empowered during NFHS-III were 2.13 times less likely to have son preference than those who are not empowered in the same age group. The impact of empowerment of women on reproductive choices has been found increasing from older generations to the current ones in the Central India and has been decreasing in the East India. Irrespective of region, the current ones who are empowered are found opting for less number of children and are lacking son preference. After controlling for the influence of other factors like education, religion etc., empowered women in the age group of 45-49 years of the South India have on an average 0.39 children less than their un-empowered counterpart. The corresponding gaps in the North India, the East India, the West India, the North-east India and the Central India are 0.6, 0.75, 0.18 and 0.41 respectively.

Figure-2: Number of children ever born, proportion of women wanting more number of boy children than girl children, ideal number of children, proportion of women ever practiced any method of contraception by level of empowerment in different age groups at all India level



A marked difference has been found in the level of son preference between empowered and un-empowered women in all the regions, even after controlling for other factors. Through several other findings, the present study suggests that both the regional and the temporal features of women empowerment are to be taken into account prior to using it as a strategy for controlling fertility. Finally, the path analysis has been used to understand the direct and the indirect effects of various factors on fertility via the empowerment of women. On applying this technique, the direct and the indirect effects (via usage of contraception and son preference) of empowerment of women on fertility have also been understood. Figure-3 shows the framework to understand the role of empowerment of women on her

reproductive choices. The following are the corresponding path equations. Where f_1, f_2, f_3, f_4, f_5 are linear functions.

Education=f_1 (place of residence, religion, caste, economic condition, work status of woman, region)

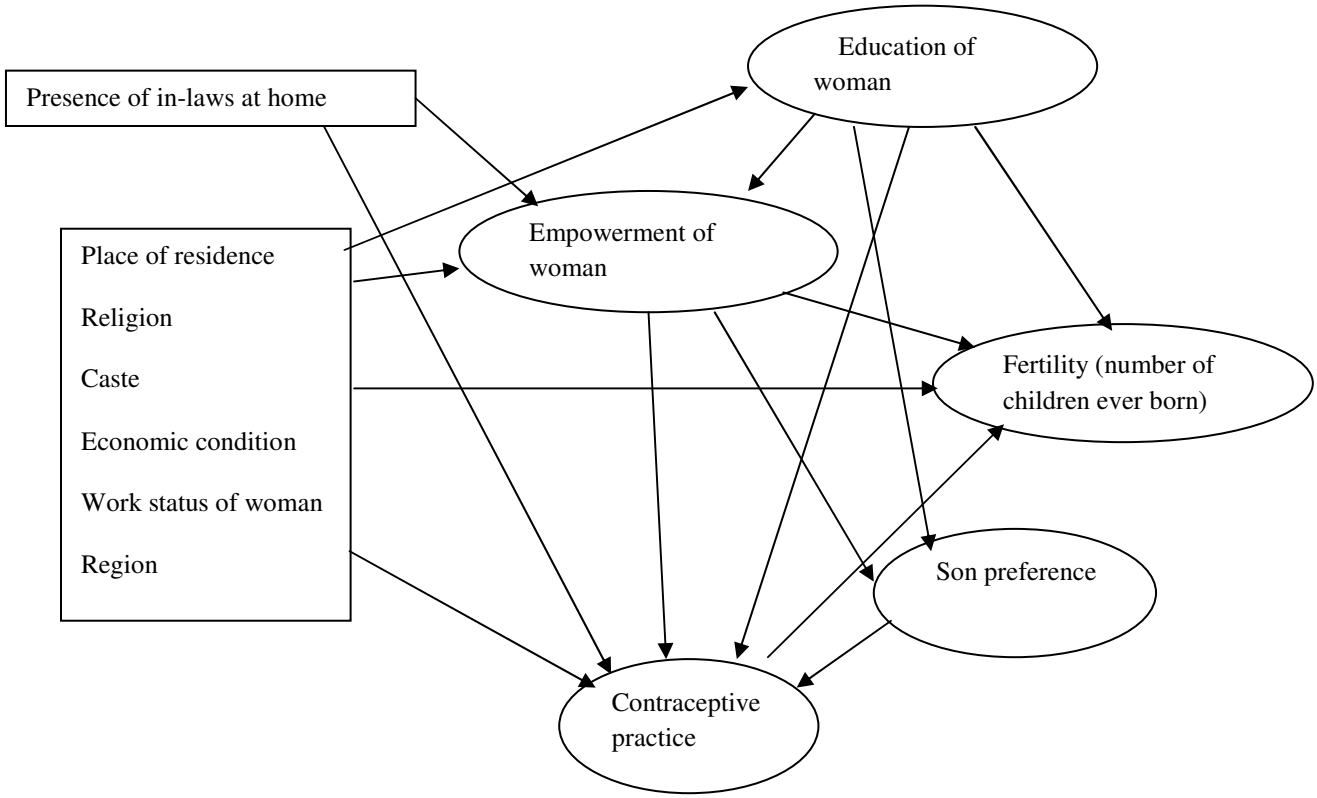
Empowerment of woman=f_2 (place of residence, religion, caste, economic condition, work status of woman, region, education, presence of in-laws at home)

Son preference= f_3 (place of residence, religion, caste, economic condition, work status of woman, region, education, empowerment of woman)

Contraceptive usage=f_4 (place of residence, religion, caste, economic condition, work status of woman, region, education, empowerment of woman, son preference, presence of in-laws at home)

Fertility= f_5 (place of residence, religion, caste, economic condition, work status of woman, region, education, empowerment of woman, son preference, contraceptive use)

Figure-3: Framework (a path diagram) for understanding the direct and the indirect effects of various factors on fertility via the empowerment of women and the role of empowerment of women on her reproductive choices.



N.B. - Variables in boxes are exogenous variables and variables in the ellipses are endogenous variables.

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