

Women Empowerment or Autonomy: A Comparative View in Bangladesh Context

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Abstract: *This study attempts to measure and distinguish women empowerment and autonomy from each other by constructing indices in three specific dimensions namely economic decision making, household decision making, and physical movement in Bangladesh context. Using data from BDHS-2004, we observe that there prevails a mid-level of women empowerment but autonomy level of Bangladeshi women is absolutely low. The level of women autonomy decreases with the increase of education whereas education increases the level of women empowerment but not smoothly. Women's current age, place of residence, education, religion, media exposure etc. are the important factors affecting women empowerment and their autonomy.*

Introduction

Based on the biological (sex) differences every society imposes certain rules, regulations, responsibilities, and rights of men and women. If we try to observe these behaviours and practices carefully, we will see that most of these rules and regulations are discriminatory. This discriminatory behaviour creates difference between men and women, which eventually gives a lower status to women in terms of men socially, culturally, religiously, economically and legally. At the 2005 World Summit, Governments of all nations agreed that “progress for women is progress for all”. But the technical terms such as autonomy, empowerment, status, gender equality etc. through which we indicate the progress of women are sometimes difficult to separate from each other, for example, autonomy from empowerment, and sometimes because of misconception, are used improperly.

It is important to understand the actual meaning of these terms to find out the absolute way of meaningful progression of women as well as society. The frequency of the use of a technical term has usually been inversely proportionate to the understanding of its meaning. For example, “empowerment” is a very widely used term, particularly in the context of women and the poor, but is often misused and poorly defined. It is not always clear whether those who use terms such as

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women empowerment, gender equality, female autonomy or women's status are referring to the same or different concepts. Some scholars argue that often there is no clear demarcation between these terms. Mason (1998) and Mason and Smith (2000) for example, treat empowerment, autonomy, and gender stratification interchangeably. Similarly, Jejeebhoy (2000) considers autonomy and empowerment as more or less equal terms, and defines both in terms of women "gaining control of their own lives vis-à-vis family, community, society, markets."

In contrast, other authors have explicitly argued that autonomy is not equivalent to empowerment, stressing that autonomy implies independence whereas empowerment may well be achieved through interdependence (Govindasamy and Malhotra 1996; Kabeer 1998; Malhotra and Mather 1997). Various studies of "women's status" often covered aspects of empowerment without explicitly labelling it as women's status, refers only the women's overall position in the community. Acharya and Bennett (1981) used the more general term "women's status" but located a nexus of gender-related power differentials in the household, noting how important the family unit is to understanding the operation of gender in a society. They also highlighted the links between women's economic roles and their control over resources and life options. While defining status, Dixon (1978) stated "women's power can be distinguished from women's status, in that status refers to women's overall position in the society, while power refers to women's ability to influence and control at the interpersonal level. Thus, female power can be defined as women's ability to control or change other women's or man's behaviour and the ability to determine important events in their lives, even when older women are opposed to them.

Empowerment may be defined as the process of removing the factors which cause the powerlessness. Empowerment has been used to represent a wide range of concepts and to describe a proliferation of outcomes. The term has been used more often to advocate for certain types of policies and intervention strategies than to analyse them, as demonstrated by a number of documents from the United Nations (UNDAW 2001; UNICEF 1999). Kabeer (2001), whose definition is the most widely accepted, defines empowerment as "the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them". Bennett (2002) described empowerment as "the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them." Keller and Mbwewe (1991) described women empowerment as "a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination". The core of the meaning of women empowerment lies in the ability of a woman to control her own destiny. Almost all definitions of women empowerment

include some reference to an expansion of choice and freedom to make decisions and take the actions necessary to shape life-outcomes (Malhotra and Schuler 2005).

According to the framework developed by the Task Force on Education and Gender Equality of the United Nations Millennium Project, resources can be seen as including capabilities (including health, nutrition, and education); access to opportunities (including access to economic assets and resources and political opportunity); and security (safety from violence and conflict). In the Task Force's conceptualization, the term gender equality reflected equality in access between women and men to each of these sets of resources. Such equality, however, is necessary but not sufficient to achieve empowerment. It creates the enabling context for an empowerment process, but does not guarantee empowerment.

Gender equity "recognizes that women and men have different needs, preferences, and interests and that equality of outcomes may necessitate different treatment of men and women" (Reeves and Baden 2000). As a result, any discussion of empowerment emphasizes the process of engaging people more than the content of what is done with them. It encompasses the ability to formulate strategic choices, and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes. From the above discussion we can conclude that women empowerment is a process through which they start gaining more power and control over their own lives and circumstances than that of the previous times whereas women autonomy is certain power of women by which they can do whatever they like to, without seeking permission or without having consent of others. The status of women means that the power and facilities women are presently having in the society. The determinants of women's status are ratio of male to female adult literacy rate, ratio of female to male life expectancy at birth, earned income share etc. (Haddad 1999). Gender equality refers to the equal opportunities for women to have in case of law, resource, power etc.

Objectives

This study attempts to clarify the differences among the technical terms like women empowerment, autonomy, status, gender equality etc. which have frequently been misused in many studies. Due to the lack of direct data, in many previous studies, proxy variables have been used to measure the empowerment of women. This study measures the empowerment and autonomy of women directly by computing indices. It presents levels of women empowerment and autonomy in different dimensions and their differences. Also an attempt has been made to examine the net effect of different variables on women empowerment and autonomy in Bangladeshi context.

Data Source and Methods

This study utilizes the data extracted from a nationally representative survey, Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) – 2004, which was conducted under the authority of National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT) of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The data collection took place over a five-month period from January 1 to May 25, 2004. Information were collected from 11,440 ever-married women of age 10-49 and 4297 men of age 15-54 from 10,500 households covering 361 sample points (clusters) in 122 urban areas and 239 rural areas throughout Bangladesh. The planning and implementation of the 2004 BDHS has not been done specifically for women empowerment. Therefore, in this study, due to missing data, instead of 11,440 ever married women, information of 2282 women for economic decision making, 5106 women for household decision making and 5699 women for physical movement dimension were available.

First we compute indices in different dimensions of women empowerment and autonomy in accordance with Haque, Tareque and Mostofa (2010) which has been explained in next section named construction of index. At the bivariate level, simple descriptive method of mean analysis and finally at the multivariate level, multiple linear regression analysis are employed.

Construction of Index

Although the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2004 was not designed to capture the specific concept of “women empowerment” or “women autonomy”, the information in this survey did cover the major dimensions of these concepts, namely, (a) economic decision making, (b) household decision making, and (c) physical movement. The indicators for different dimensions used are in accordance with Mason and Smith (2003). They included the indicators, “Who decides how to spend money”, “Final say on large household purchases” and “Final say on making household purchases for daily needs” under **Economic Decision Making**, “Final say on own health care”, “Final say on child health care”, “Final say on food to be cooked each day” and “Decision on family planning” under **Household Decision Making** and “Final say on visits to family or relatives”, “Goes outside the village/town/city alone”, “Goes to a health centre or hospital alone” and “Goes shopping alone or with somebody else” under **Freedom of Movement** dimensions. They used actual score only for their study. But we went one step further in indexing the scores similar to Human Development Index (HDI).

The whole process can be presented in a diagrammatic form which is shown in Figure1.

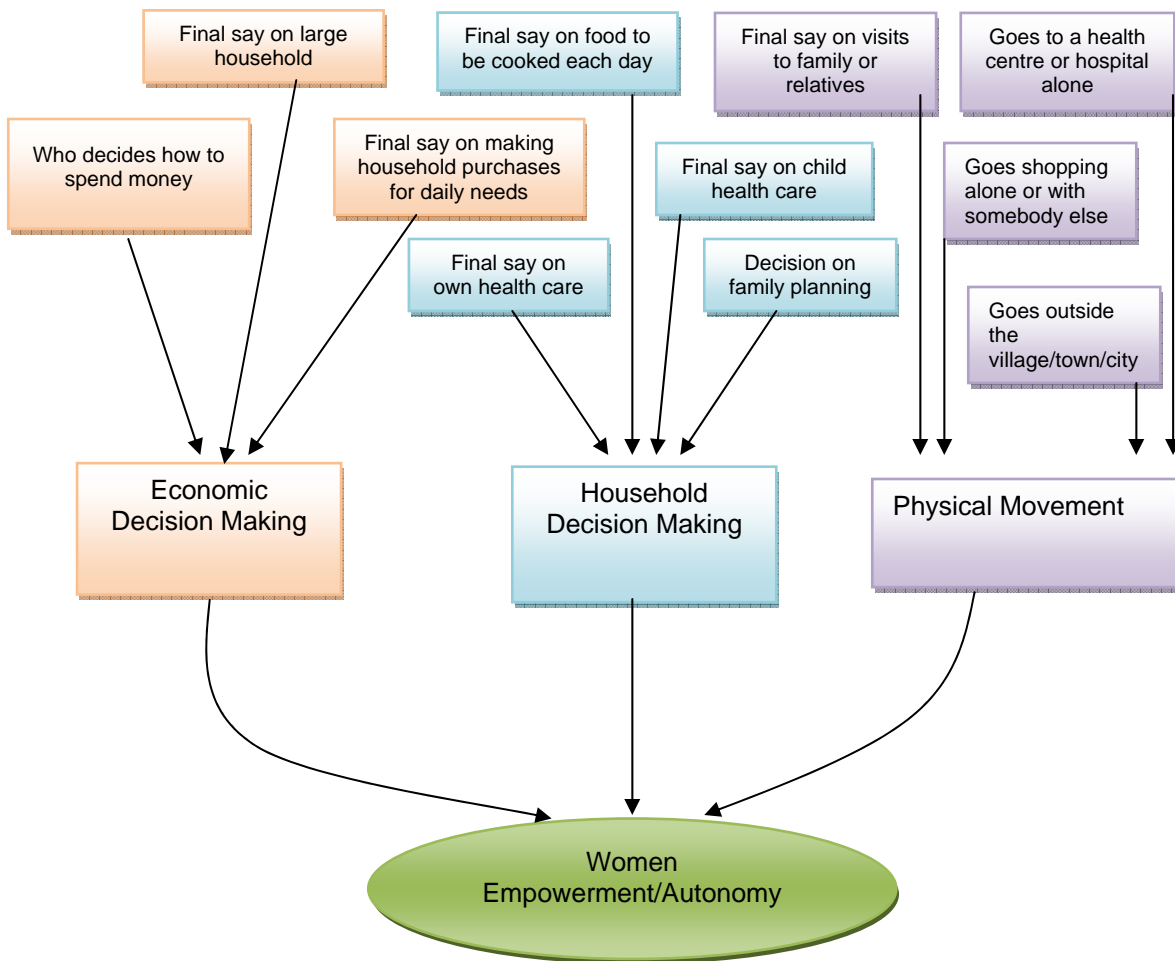


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the construction of women empowerment and women autonomy index

In this study an attempt has been made to measure women empowerment and autonomy in the domestic sphere by making women empowerment index and women autonomy index for the aforesaid dimensions. The detailed description of these three dimensions with their relevant indicators is given in table 1. The index of each dimension (economic decision making, household decision making, and physical movement) is constructed following HDI made by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP 2005) using the formula below:

$$\text{Dimension Index} = \frac{\text{Actual score} - \text{Minimum score}}{\text{Maximum score} - \text{Minimum score}}$$

The actual score of each dimension is calculated by summing the positive responses of the respondents in favour of their empowerment or autonomy. Maximum score of each dimension is

the total number of indicators belonging to that dimension and minimum score is zero with all negative response. The value of those indices ranges from zero to one and one minus the indices value measures the gap of empowerment or autonomy.

Table 1: Description of indicators and dimensions for constructing women empowerment and autonomy indices

Dimension	Description of indicator	Coding	Frequency (Percent)	Measurement Scale for Empowerment	Measurement Scale for Autonomy
Economic Decision Making	Who decides how to spend money	1=Respondent alone 2=Respondent and husband/partner 3=Respondent and other person 4=Husband/partner alone 5=Someone else	48.0 36.3 3.1 11.0 1.7	1,2,3 = 1 4,5 = 0	1=1 Else=0
	Final say on large household purchases	1=Respondent alone 2=Respondent and husband/partner 3=Respondent and other person 4=Husband/partner alone 5=Someone else 6=Decision not made/not applicable	12.2 35.8 9.4 30.5 12.0	1,2,3 = 1 4,5,6 = 0	1=1 Else=0
	Final say on making household purchases for daily needs	1=Respondent alone 2=Respondent and husband/partner 3=Respondent and other person 4=Husband/partner alone 5=Someone else 6=Decision not made/not applicable	21.4 28.1 8.2 30.0 12.4 0.0	1,2,3 = 1 4,5,6 = 0	1=1 Else=0
Household Decision Making	Final say on own health care	1=Respondent alone 2=Respondent and husband/partner 3=Respondent and other person 4=Husband/partner alone 5=Someone else 6=Decision not made/not applicable	21.5 22.1 5.4 42.9 8.2 0.0	1,2,3 = 1 4,5,6 = 0	1=1 Else=0
	Final say on child health care	1=Respondent alone 2=Respondent and husband/partner 3=Respondent and other person 4=Husband/partner alone 5=Someone else 6=Decision not made/not applicable	20.9 31.0 5.4 28.3 7.0 0.0 7.5	1,2,3 = 1 4,5,6,7 = 0	1=1 Else=0

		applicable 7=Not applicable/no child			
	Final say on food to be cooked each day	1=Respondent alone 2=Respondent and husband/partner 3=Respondent and other person 4=Husband/partner alone 5=Someone else 6=Decision not made/not applicable	72.3 4.4 9.6 3.2 10.5 0.0	1,2,3 = 1 4,5,6 = 0	1=1 Else=0
	Decision on family planning	1=Mainly respondent 2=Mainly husband 3=Joint decision 6=Others	15.4 8.0 76.4 0.2	1,3 = 1 2,6 = 0	1=1 Else=0
Physical Movement	Final say on visits to family or relatives	1=Respondent alone 2=Respondent and husband/partner 3=Respondent and other person 4=Husband/partner alone 5=Someone else 6=Decision not made/not applicable	16.4 34.0 8.0 31.6 10.0 0.0	1,2,3 = 1 4,5,6 = 0	1=1 Else=0
	Goes outside the village/town/city alone	0=No 1=Alone 2=With children 6=Others	30.9 22.2 43.5 3.4	1 = 1 0,2,6 = 0	1=1 Else=0
	Goes to a health centre or hospital alone	0=No 1=Alone 2=With children 3=With husband 6=Others	9.1 30.9 20.1 34.0 5.8	1 = 1 0,2,3,6 = 0	1=1 Else=0
	Goes shopping alone or with somebody else	1=Alone 2=With children 3=With husband 4=With relatives	46.9 18.6 22.5 12.0	1 = 1 2,3,4 = 0	1=1 Else=0

Notes: Here the number of items (indicators) is 11; Cronbach's alpha value is 0.706 and Cronbach's alpha value based on standardized items is 0.689.

Dimensions of Women Empowerment/Autonomy:

In a study, Malhotra et al. (2002) synthesized and listed the most commonly used dimensions of women empowerment. They categorized women empowerment into six dimensions such as economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, legal, political and psychological. But due to unavailability of all the data regarding aforementioned dimensions, here women empowerment and autonomy have been divided into three dimensions viz. economic decision making,

household decision making and physical movement with different measurement scale (see table 1).

Empowerment/Autonomy in Economic Decision Making

Control over decision-making is a fundamental component to the concept of empowerment/autonomy. Women empowerment/autonomy in economic decision making refers to the women's ability to share or to control over the decision processes regarding domestic financial matters with husband or other male family members. It would uplift the status, control over resources, meeting the basic needs and altogether improving self-reliance, thereby reducing women's economic subordination. Indeed, the measurement of women empowerment in economic decision making is based on three indicators such as participation in the family's major economic decision, final say on household or daily purchases, and opinion on how to spend money. Economic decision making index tends to provide the measurement of empowerment/autonomy of women regarding economic decision making.

Empowerment/Autonomy in Household Decision Making

Empowerment/autonomy of women regarding household decision making refers to the extent of women's ability to participate in formulating and executing decisions on domestic affair, child-welfare, own health care and family planning in coordination with other male family members. The increased role in household decision making would enable women to improve their self-determination, control over resources, self-esteem, autonomy, and status and power relations within households. Measurement of women empowerment/autonomy in household decision making is calculated on the basis of four indicators such as women's participation in decision on their own health care, child health care, which food to be cooked each day and their participation in discussion on family planning.

Empowerment/Autonomy in Physical Movement

Empowerment/autonomy in physical movement refers to the freedom of women to move to their necessary places without being escorted. Several studies have revealed that promotion of women's freedom of movement is necessary to make them capable of making their own choices, to change their attitudes, to improve their social networks and to reduce their level of poverty. According to Parveen and Leonhauser (2004), the lack of women's physical mobility deprives them of getting better livelihood opportunities. Here, we measure women empowerment/autonomy in physical movement by making index on the basis of questions about whether they can go shopping, outside the village/town/city or to hospital alone and whether they can visit their relative's house alone.

Results and Discussion

Decision making has been a central concern of much prior research on women autonomy. It is commonly believed that economic empowerment and stringent legal instruments have important role to play in combating social inequalities and disparities. Economic solvency is vital to ensure basic necessities and opportunities for every citizen including men and women. It is hypothesized that a greater involvement in household decision making will place women in a better position to exert influence over health, control over household resources etc. and women's freedom of physical movement outside the home may have important implications for exposure to information, development of interpersonal skills, increased self-confidence, and opportunities to take independent action. Table 2 presents the comparative result of women empowerment and women autonomy by mean values of economic decision-making index (EDMI), household decision-making index (HDMI), and physical movement index (PMI) for some selected socio-economic and demographic settings of women.

Table 2: Mean Values of Empowerment and Autonomy Indices by Some Demographic and Socio-economic Variables

Variables	Mean of EDM I	Mean of HDMI	Mean of PMI
Respondent's age			
<20	0.556 (0.180)	0.597 (0.180)	0.295 (0.190)
20-35	0.725 (0.310)	0.734 (0.320)	0.456 (0.340)
36+	0.790 (0.430)	0.758 (0.370)	0.576 (0.470)
Husband's age			
<20	0.533 (0.270)	0.634 (0.090)	0.287 (0.170)
20-35	0.672 (0.220)	0.678 (0.260)	0.372 (0.260)
36+	0.740 (0.300)	0.757 (0.360)	0.508 (0.390)
Age difference between spouses			
<0	0.633 (0.570)	0.633 (0.420)	0.567 (0.500)
0	0.952 (0.520)	0.816 (0.370)	0.550 (0.420)
1-5	0.714 (0.240)	0.724 (0.320)	0.446 (0.330)
6-10	0.708 (0.260)	0.712 (0.310)	0.442 (0.320)
11-20	0.721 (0.280)	0.734 (0.310)	0.448 (0.330)
21+	0.748 (0.340)	0.711 (0.380)	0.514 (0.420)
Age at first marriage			
<15	0.731 (0.360)	0.717 (0.330)	0.488 (0.390)
15-16	0.742 (0.310)	0.725 (0.310)	0.457 (0.340)
17-19	0.704 (0.330)	0.731 (0.300)	0.433 (0.310)

20+	0.817 (0.360)	0.720 (0.280)	0.478 (0.350)
Respondent's education			
Illiterate	0.734 (0.370)	0.722 (0.350)	0.541 (0.450)
Primary	0.750 (0.320)	0.724 (0.320)	0.463 (0.350)
Secondary	0.681 (0.300)	0.711 (0.280)	0.398 (0.280)
Higher	0.843 (0.330)	0.748 (0.270)	0.476 (0.340)
Husband's education			
Illiterate	0.743 (0.370)	0.719 (0.350)	0.526 (0.430)
Primary	0.701 (0.290)	0.719 (0.320)	0.455 (0.350)
Secondary	0.733 (0.370)	0.720 (0.290)	0.435 (0.320)
Higher	0.811 (0.340)	0.733 (0.280)	0.445 (0.310)
Place of residence			
Rural	0.712 (0.310)	0.704 (0.310)	0.449 (0.340)
Urban	0.773 (0.400)	0.750 (0.320)	0.493 (0.380)
Religion			
Non-Muslim	0.705 (0.240)	0.726 (0.280)	0.488 (0.360)
Muslim	0.741 (0.360)	0.721 (0.320)	0.467 (0.360)
Media exposure			
Yes	0.752 (0.340)	0.725 (0.310)	0.458 (0.430)
No	0.703 (0.350)	0.712 (0.330)	0.524 (0.340)
Total	0.737 (0.340)	0.722 (0.320)	0.470 (0.360)

Note: Mean values of autonomy indices are shown in parenthesis.

Age is a factor of life cycle that affects a woman's status in the family. A Bangladeshi traditional concept is that daughter in law may be responsible for the household work but mother in law has the authority to take the decisions about the family matters. Similar to this, the result of this study shows both empowerment and autonomy, in all three dimensions, are higher for the older respondents and their husbands but the autonomy level of women is much lower than the empowerment level. Big spousal age difference is common in Bangladesh and the result here shows interesting variations. The women of same age as their husbands have the highest and women senior to their husbands have the lowest empowerment in both economic decision making and household decision making but an inverse result is seen for autonomy of women and the women senior to their husbands have the highest level of autonomy in all three dimensions. Age at first marriage is a very useful demographic variable. The formation of first marriage brings important changes in a women's family situation and in her future expectations and opportunities. Singh and Samara (1996) have noted that a women's age at first marriage may be a useful indicator of her status. Empowerment level in economic decision making is comparatively higher

for the women who got married after 20+ years of age but inconsistent results were found for other groups. Surprisingly enough, the autonomy level of women who got married in their earlier age (<15 years) have the highest level of autonomy in all three dimensions.

Educational attainment is, without doubt the most fundamental prerequisite for empowering women in all spheres of society. Husband's education is also important to understand the needs of wife and involve wife in decision making and to give freedom of choices along with movement. Furthermore, education is a powerful instrument for acquiring new values and, consequently, for modifying ones relationship with other human beings and the environment. This study shows that higher educated women have the highest level of empowerment in economic decision making and household decision making but illiterate women have the highest empowerment in physical movement. On the other hand, illiterate women have the highest autonomy in all three dimensions and even the autonomy level of women in household decision making decreases with the increase of educational level. Husband's education shows almost the same result for both empowerment and autonomy of women. This suggests that education, in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, does not always improve women empowerment regarding physical movement (Haque, Tareque and Mostofa, 2010) as well as the overall empowerment or autonomy of women.

As expected, the result shows more empowerment and more autonomy for urban women than that of rural women. Interestingly, Muslim women are more autonomous than non-Muslim women in economic decision making and in household decision making while for physical movement both Muslim and non-Muslim women have the same level of autonomy. On the other hand, non-Muslim women are more empowered in household decision making and in physical movement but not in economic decision making.

Exposure to media is an index on exposure to mass media and was formed using three questions asked regarding their exposure to three media (print, audio, and visual). Media is the medium through which a woman could obtain knowledge/awareness/information outside the school curriculum. This study shows wide variation for level of empowerment and level of autonomy. The women who have exposure to media are more empowered but less autonomous in economic decision making and household decision making. Again the women having exposure to media are more autonomous but less empowered in physical movement than women who did not have exposure to media. This supports the thinking that the increase in empowerment of women does not always increase the autonomy of women.

Factors Affecting Women Empowerment and Women Autonomy

Multiple linear regression analysis has been employed to examine the effect of different socio-demographic variables on women empowerment and on their autonomy in different dimensions. The results of this study show interesting variations in the impact of different variables on women empowerment and on women autonomy. It is found that women's age and place of residence have positive significant effect on women empowerment and also on women autonomy in all three dimensions i.e. both women empowerment and women autonomy increases with the increase of women's age and urban women are more empowered and autonomous than that of rural women. Women's education, a leading variable, shows negative effect on women autonomy in all three dimensions but positive significant effect on women empowerment in household decision making. This means that education in our patriarchal conservative society does not necessarily improve women autonomy although it empowers women. Husband's education depicts almost same result as women's education. Although age at marriage of women significantly increases women empowerment in economic dimension but it shows insignificantly negative effect on women autonomy in all three dimensions. Religion in Bangladesh is an important variable that has significant effect on both empowerment and autonomy in case of economic decision making. Interestingly enough, Muslim women are significantly more autonomous in all three dimensions than that of non-Muslim women. Media exposure has significantly positive effect on women empowerment but insignificant effect on women autonomy in economic decision making.

Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression of Different Empowerment and Autonomy Indices by Some Selected Socio-demographic Variables

Variables	Coefficients of empowerment and autonomy indices					
	EDMI		HDMI		PMI	
	EI	AI	EI	AI	EI	AI
Constant	0.3520***	-0.0693	0.5710***	0.1490***	0.1890***	0.1100***
Respondent's age	0.0068***	0.0089***	0.0057***	0.0068***	0.0096***	0.0095***
Age at marriage	0.00451*	-0.0072	-0.0031**	-0.0040***	0.0094	-0.0005
Respondent's education	0.0021	-0.0036	0.0041***	-0.0022*	-0.0040***	-0.0069***
Husband's education	-0.0014	0.0016	-0.0018**	-0.0019***	-0.0015**	-0.0010
Place of residence						
Rural®						
Urban	0.0431***	0.0891***	0.0418***	0.0216***	0.0519***	0.0483***
Religion						
Non-Muslim®						

Muslim	0.0503**	0.1200***	-0.0015	0.0404***	-0.0046	0.0090
Media exposure						
No [®]						
Yes	0.0543***	0.0033	0.0125	0.0069	-0.0190*	-0.0261**

Notes: 'EI' refers to empowerment index,
 'AI' refers to autonomy index,
 '®' refers to reference group
 Significant level: ***, ** and * indicate $p < 0.001$, $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.10$ respectively.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The level of women empowerment in economic decision making and household decision making is satisfactory but the empowerment in physical movement is very low and the autonomy level of women for all three dimensions in Bangladesh is the least. Although this country has been governed by two women leaders for almost two decades but traditionally there prevails negative social view about women autonomy in the household level, even women themselves think autonomy is bad and sometimes it is a shameful matter for male members if a family is driven by women. Therefore, unfortunately the situation of women remains unchanged.

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