

**Title: Women's autonomy within household and school participation in India****Authors: Dhiman Das****Abstract:**

In this research I examine the effect of women's decision making power within household on their children's participation in education. I plan to study this in case of India, which has a very high rates of non-participation in education and drop out after age 11 among those who participate. This has important consequences for the realization of the country's developmental potentials. In the literature on access and retention of childhood schooling in developing countries, the problems of poverty, social exclusion and returns to education are found to be important in determining parental decision towards education. In this research, I plan to examine whether women's bargaining power at the household level has any additional explanatory power for school participation of their children. In addition I plan to explore how woman's bargaining power interacts with other factors affecting school participation.

**Motivation:**

An important challenge for India to reach its developmental potential is the low rate of school completion of its children. Several public programs have been undertaken (including a constitutional amendment making education as a fundamental right) and literacy rate, and more recently, participation in primary school have risen significantly over years (Asadullah and Yalonetzky 2012; Ramachandran 2007). However an important pattern is the high rate of drop out after the first few years of schooling. School participation rises between 6 and 11 years of age at which point it starts declining sharply. For girls the decline starts slightly earlier than the boys. The pattern is the same if we look at data from the 1980s, 1990s or the 2000s. The only encouraging sign is the rise in the height of the curve with increasing level of participation at the primary level (though it makes the subsequent decline even steeper) and the decline in the disparity between the boys and the girls. In this study I intend to investigate whether low decision making power of mothers in resource allocation within the family can explain this pattern.

## **Background:**

Several studies point out to the role of poverty in school access and participation (Boyle et al. 2002; Huebler 2008; Hunt 2008; Ramachandran 2007). Poverty makes school unattractive on one hand for its associated direct and indirect expenses and on the other hand by raising the opportunity costs of the child's time. A related issue is that of child labor (Edmonds 2007). However, child labor may not be the only symptom of poverty related withdrawal. For example, using a time use survey Ramachandran (2004) observe that large majority of out of school children in India are not engaged in full time work and many school going children are also involved in some amount of work. In a cross country study (not involving India) Ersado (2005) finds that poverty drives child work and schooling in rural but not in urban areas.

An important driver of schooling decision is the private return to education. Extensive literature on India highlights variation in economic returns to education by gender, social hierarchy (caste), income/wage quintiles and location (rural/urban) etc. and their interactions (Agrawal 2011; Duraisamy 2002; Kingdon and Theopold 2008; Vasudeva Dutta 2006).

In India the most important problems are around gender and social hierarchy. Girls and particularly older girls work more than boys and gender of the sibling matters (Edmonds 2006). One of the important factor affecting private returns on education for girls is women's labor participation. Studies have shown that, in India, women's labor participation falls with education (Das 2006), husband's education and wages, household wealth, social hierarchy and the decline is steeper for higher castes (Das 2006; Eswaran, Ramaswami and Wadhwa 2013; Rahman and Rao 2004). The main explanation is in social norms which restricts women's movement outside home and which are usually lax for those belonging to lower level of social hierarchy (Chen 1995; Das 2006). Thus in rural areas where women face the strongest education penalty low caste women work in employment which hardly requires any education. In urban areas only very highly educated women, who also belong to very high socio economic status, work though they constitute a very small proportion of the total female population (Das 2006; Das and Desai 2003). Various glass ceilings and walls at different level of socio-economic stratification keep most of the women involved in household production (Kingdon and Unni 2001). In addition there are issues of marriage at low ages among girls. Thus private returns to education India are highly unfavorable for girls and may explain the majority of withdrawal from schools. Several

studies recently have highlighted the difference between attitudinal and behavioral bias against girls in developing countries (Guilmoto 2009; Gupta, Chung and Shuzhuo 2009; Vanneman, Desai and Vikram 2012). These studies observe that while attitudinal bias has declined over years, behavioral motivations which are subject to situational contingencies often unrelated to bias have increased.

The next source of discrimination which results in differences in return is due to caste. Caste system is a social order among the majority Hindu community, which essentially results in discrimination in economic, educational and other opportunities by birth (Balagopalan 2003; Beteille 1992; Sedwal and Kamat 2008). The lowest level of attendance is among the Scheduled Castes and other indigenous population called the Scheduled Tribes (Motiram and Osberg 2012; Ramachandran 2007).

There are also evidences of differential private returns to education at different level of wage (Agrawal 2011) and income (Chamarbagwala 2008), landed or landless (Foster and Rosenzweig 2001) and among regular and casual workers (Vasudeva Dutta 2006). Household which critically depend on labor for survival lack the ability to respond to the benefits of higher education.

Another relevant factor which influences the returns to education is the quality of schools. 50% of the schools have no water supply, 35% don't have blackboards and approximately 90% have no functioning toilets (Ramachandran 2007). In addition there are also very low teacher pupil ratios and high rates of teacher absenteeism. All of these vary across Indian states and within states and have its roots in India's historical development (Banerjee and Iyer 2005; Banerjee and Iyer 2008; Chaudhary 2009).

However, very little is known about the effect of women's decision making power within the family and its role on schooling decisions of their children in India.

### **Mechanism:**

There is extensive literature that finds that women's decision making abilities have significant impact on child outcomes particularly in health and nutrition in the context of developing countries (Doss 2012; Quisumbing and Maluccio 2000). The purpose of this study is to explore whether such impact can be also seen in the case of school participation.

On one hand, childhood health and nutrition is known to have strong effects in school preparedness and access (Alderman et al. 2001; Pridmore 2007; Walker et al. 2007). Behrman (1996) and more recently Glewwe and Miguel (2007) have noted that though the mechanism is not well established there are overwhelming evidence of the a strong relation between preschool nutrition and subsequent school attainment. In addition, malnutrition and health can also affect school dropout through late enrollment (Glewwe and Jacoby 1995) and irregular attendance (Boyle et al. 2002; Colclough, Rose and Tembon 2000). Besides lower cognitive abilities may lower the returns to education (Sood 2010).

On the other hand, higher decision making abilities may have ambiguous effects on child's time allocation. The labor force participation literature for India mentioned earlier (Das 2006) finds that majority of women are involved in household production. A very high majority (approximately 90%) indicates that they do that because of compulsion. If higher bargaining power leads to higher consumption of things preferred by women (e.g. leisure or employment outside home), it may have negative consequences of children's time allocation.

Particularly in case of child labor, Basu (2006) notes that as woman's power rise child labor initially fall and then rise. Smith and Byron (2005) also find that in some parts of India, increased bargaining power is associated with discrimination against girls. Similar evidences were also observed in case of father migrating families in China (Chen 2006)

So it is worth studying empirically the interaction of these two factors – the health and nutrition and household time allocation – in affecting school participation. In addition it is also important to investigate how improved decision making power interacts with some of the structural factors – particularly those that influence private rate of return.

### **Analytical strategy:**

I plan to study this using the India Human Development Survey (2005) which is a nationally representative survey of 41,554 households in 1,503 villages and 971 urban neighborhoods across India. The main variable of interest is school attendance in the previous academic year. Essentially I plan to identify the probability of attendance for children in the age group 11 through 18 (in alternative specifications I plan to also explore 11-14 and 14-18). Though primary school attendance are relatively high, I also plan to explore the probability of attendance

for the 6-10 age group to identify persistent and altering patterns between the earlier and later age groups.

In a reduced form version of a model for schooling decision, probability of attendance is expected to be a function of child characteristics, family characteristics and school characteristics. In addition to other parental characteristics, I plan to use a measure of women's autonomy based on variables available in the DHS surveys. First there is the actual evidence of such power (ability to make decisions regarding own health, major household purchases, visiting friends and relatives) and also there are variables indicating sources of bargaining power (works for cash, any exposure to media) and the context of bargaining power (age at first marriage, difference in age and education with partner, nuclear family structure and attitudes towards gendered institutions like domestic violence and male child preference) which are identified important in several studies (Kabeer 1999; Kishor 2000; Smith 2003). I plan to use the actual measure on its own and also in different specifications combine them using principal component analysis (Smith 2003) or as part of a system of equation (Mabsout and Van Staveren 2010). Of particular interest is the interaction of decision with factors that influence the return to education like caste, wealth, rural/urban as well as higher level interactions.

I intend to show that decision making power do have an implication on school participation once other factors are controlled for. The results are expected to highlight the importance of focusing on women's empowerment in address pressing issues of human development in developing countries like India.

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