

# Understanding Female Autonomy in India through Their Family Headship Status

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## Abstract

*Sex of the head of the household can provide insights into gender inequality and power dynamics that exist at the household level. Leadership positions are rarely given to a female in the Indian society. The hierarchy of authority in the household is based on age (privileging the older) and gender (privileging the men). Marriage is still the most important rite of passage in a woman's life in India and it is also a medium through which autonomy is realized. This paper explores how women realize ways to achieve headship in the family in an otherwise male dominated household. Data was obtained from Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS) II, conducted between 2011 and 2012, and which sampled 39,523 ever married women from age 15 years and above. Autonomy indices were developed to show active decision-making power in the household. In addition, how headship status influences levels of autonomy were explored by employing multinomial logistic regression. Findings showed decision making abilities were distinguishable for women without spouse compared with those who were married. Levels of autonomy also reflected the existing hierarchies in the family, a situation relatively better for women who were not in marital union.*

## Keywords

*Autonomy index; stereotyped family roles; middle-age; decision making; India*

## Introduction

Sex of the head of the household can provide a meaningful insight on gendered inequality and power dynamics in the family. The initial purpose to use the term 'head of household' in various surveys and country censuses was to identify a reference person within the household to whom the other residing members (co-residents) can be related. This is also to avoid double entry of those already enumerated (Rosenhouse, 1989). However, this has led to an authoritative implication in understating gender composition of the household. The term 'female headed household' has even more complexity, given the cultural differences in developing countries and the way the headship is conferred upon the family member. Hence it can be used as a measurement of "gendered aspect of household structure" (Folbre, 1991). Female-headed households (FHhs) account for 13.4% of all households in India, the share of which has risen from 10% over a decade (Census of India, 2001; 2011). Rapid industrialization, urbanization and gentrification changes the family system and inter-generational social mobility and in turn disrupt family relationships leading to family breakdowns such as divorce, separation and desertion, more commonly seen in female-headed families. This paper focuses on decision-making capabilities and how levels of autonomy influence the headship position in the family, which they achieve only after reaching mature stages of life. The Second Round of Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS) for 2011-2012 covered

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42,155 households all over India, out of which 6,031 were female headed households (Desai & Vanneman, 2015).

Quantification of autonomy and its determinants are done with the data available from the women's file provided by the IHDS II where a sample of 39,523 ever married women from ages 15 years and above were categorized based on marital status - currently married and currently not married - and are further filtered by age to see how autonomy is realized as one enters the mature stages of life. The IHDS provided comprehensive information for economic, demographic and gender relation research. Comparisons were drawn for women currently married and women who were not currently in a marital union. Autonomy indices are constructed for women based on their two marital statuses to show their active decision-making power in the household. Further, how headship status influences levels of autonomy are also explored by employing multinomial logistic regression.

The results showed influence and control at interpersonal level were low when the women were married. This paper points to an inverse relationship between family size and prevalence of female-headed households in India and female autonomy in general. The underlying demographic components and the influence of cultural and social aspects within the country help to uncover the reasons behind a formation of a female-headed household. This paper contributes to a fresh perspective to the dynamics of gender relations and female autonomy in India.

## Conceptualization of Female Autonomy

Scholars of family demography have studied decision making patterns in different families over the years now. They have come up with various terms, such as 'decision making power', 'power structure', 'marital authority pattern' 'authority' and 'autonomy' to understand the power relations in households (Lamouse, 1969; Safilios-Rothschild, 1982; Jejeebhoy, 1995). These terms are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes are cautiously differentiated to denote a particular pattern of power imbalances in the family. It must be noted autonomy is a multidimensional concept which consists of decision making, influence and authority. Safilios-Rothschild (1970) writes influence is the degree to which "formal or informal, covert and overt forces exerted by one spouse upon the other" and also by another member, and it is successful in showing that person's point of view and in turn, his/her decision. The main question is: who decides that a particular person is in charge of well-being of the household and why are the others submitted to him or her?

'Autonomy has been defined as the capacity to manipulate one's personal environment through control over resources and information in order to make decisions about one's own concerns or about close family members' (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Niraula & Morgan, 1996; Bloom, Wypij, & Das Gupta, 2001). Women's autonomy thus, can be conceptualized as their ability to determine events in their lives and freedom of movement, even though other individuals may be opposed to their wishes (Safilios-Rothschild, 1982; Mason, 1996).

Autonomy of women is closely related to the betterment of women's status in society compared with men and females in other societies as. Status in the family is a complex interplay of kinship pattern, family structure, and intergenerational relationships. Several studies have pointed out how a woman's status is never static and change from either a high to low point or vice versa (Bart, 1969; Vatuk, 1987; Das Gupta, 1996). This change was analogized by Bart (1969) as the movement of a Ferris wheel. Like the wheel, a woman's status is high at one point of the life cycle while low at some other point. Some societies accord a higher status to their women when they are young while others after the latter have achieved

a certain age. Das Gupta (1996) rightly points out that there are two basic patterns of life cycle shifts in autonomy where “power, authority and autonomy are subsumed under the shorthand of autonomy”.

**Figure 1:** Patterns of female autonomy

	<u>Married youth</u>		<u>Older ages</u>
<b>PATTERN 1</b>	Higher autonomy	➡	Lower autonomy
<b>PATTERN 2</b>	Lower autonomy	➡	Higher autonomy

Source: Adapted from Das Gupta, 1996.

Pattern 1 (Figure 1) represents societies in North Europe where autonomy is highest among young married couple. Pattern 2 represents a typical scenario in South Asian countries, such as India, China and Bangladesh, where power and autonomy increases with age but they plummet in extreme old ages. Pattern is clearly when the women achieve middle age where she attains the highest authority in family, sometimes exceeding men or the oldest female member. Women’s life cycle reflects ‘double powerlessness’ where they are not only subjugated by men but also by other women at various stages of their life cycle (Das Gupta, 1996). In rural areas, it is more common to find joint or extended family units whereby a mature and experienced person with authoritative and managerial power becomes the head of the household. In such families, inheritance of such power (also property) is obtained only by the men in the family and by older women, and in fewer cases by women who are widowed, separated or divorced. Bonds between ‘patrikin’ is considered much stronger than marital bonds (Das Gupta, 1996). Scholars in the field of gender studies, have pointed out age at marriage is crucial in understanding the realization of autonomy in middle ages. When women are married off at an early ages, more time is spent in affinal family and this helps them to imbibe the functioning of that family. She learns the differential treatment of men and women in the family and the use of power to maintain the conventions of the family. A woman after marriage is expected to ‘obey’ her husband and other senior members in the family with little opinion in domestic and economic matters and with far less freedom of movement. In marriage, the only way to improve her position in the family is through her fertility, and more importantly, the number of sons she produces to continue the lineage. (Das Gupta, 1987; Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). A positive change in female status is concomitant with the onset of their menopause which occurs during the “social age-grade of middle age”. Once a woman enters this stage, major social and familial changes take place in her position, because her fertility has drawn to a close. “Once a woman is past her childbearing years, the menstrual customs no longer apply to her, thus she receives freedom from male authority and also achieves a greater freedom of movement” (Ezzo, 1991). However, it is also important to note the strong foothold of the women in her old age is dependent on the support of her son(s), especially if she is widowed (Vlassoff, 1990; Das Gupta, 1996).

## Data and Methods

Autonomy has been broadly conceptualized in this paper to show the relation between decision making power and authority of the women in the family as she approaches her autumn years. In this paper, “currently not married/currently not in marital union” includes women above 49 years of age and are either divorced, separated, widowed. However, this paper does not compare male and female heads and their status in the family.

Two sets of samples were generated from the IHDS II dataset. Women currently in marital union account for majority of the sample (82%). However, the 49 years of age cut off led to substantial alteration in the sample size. The sample size decreased to 4,241 from 39,523. This was later divided into marital status to discover the women's level of autonomy with or without the presence of their spouse in the household. Age and marital status were used as an indicator of status of female-headed household. Hence, the dataset was divided based on age and compared across currently married and currently unmarried women.

The sample for currently not married women aged above 49 years was 744 and the mean age of the group was 54 years. The sample size of married women above 49 years of age was 3,497 and their mean age was 53 years. A cut off age of 49 years was used as a benchmark to see whether a woman becomes family head after waxing and waning of their authority and autonomy. The justification for the cut off age was due to three reasons. First, as the women grows older and her children matures, she gradually reaches the end of her childbearing years. The average age of menopause in India is 47 years, though it could happen anytime between the ages of 46 and 51 years (Kriplani & Banerjee, 2005; Palacios, Henderson, Siseles, Tan & Villaseca, 2010). Hence, the 49 years age cut off was chosen to show the autonomy of older women, as clearly, on reaching this age, there was less restrictions on them in addition to new privileges. They are viewed as 'asexual' and the "negation of their sexuality can be translated in terms of power in terms of autonomy" (Safilios-Rothschild, 1982). Second, in a rigid gender stratified society like India, sex ratio is still low owing to female feticide, low life expectancy due to higher childhood mortality and other adverse health and life conditions. The relatively few women, as compared to men, who reach middle or old age achieve a special status which enables them to enjoy some freedom, independence in decision making and control over lives of themselves, and a supremacy to control the lives of younger members in the family (Safilios-Rothschild, 1982). Third, age at which they become head is also an important factor. There are 6,031 female headed households in India and the female heads have a mean age of 52 years, as gleaned from the overall dataset of IHDS II (2011-2012).

## Autonomy Index

IHDS II posed a range of questions regarding the decision-making dynamics within and without the households. These not only reflect the existing gender relations in the family, but also the underlying patriarchal forces shaping such arrangements. Seven variables with three responses for each were obtained from the questions, separately for currently married and currently not married women above 49 years of age.

Weights are given to each response, and depending upon who takes the decision the score for the responses are assigned, ranging between 1 and 3 with increasing order of importance. Thus, each indicator (equal to each question) has a minimum value of 1 and a maximum of 3. For currently married women, highest weight is given to the decisions which are taken by herself, as it can be assumed that she is capable of taking decisions for the family irrespective of the presence of her spouse in the household. It is important to capture the extent to which her decisions are being respected in the household. The next highest score is given to the decisions taken jointly by the wife and her husband. The reason behind such assumption is that it is better if decisions regarding households, when in marital union, are taken together. It should not be any one of the spouse's responsibility or sole power to exercise such choices. A husband and wife should equally share such decisions. Additionally, when the decisions are taken for the betterment of the family and not about the welfare of the man or woman alone, it seems reasonable to accept such joint decision to be the highest form of autonomy

within a conjugal union (Kishor, 1995). However, it may sometimes happen, there are covert pressures where it appears the decision is being taken jointly, but in reality, it is actually the decision of the influential spouse (Safilios-Rothschild, 1970). Decisions taken by the husband and other members in the family is given the lowest score as in Indian families, there are tendencies for the husband and elder parents and in-laws to dominate over major household decisions, curbing the space for woman to exercise her choice.

For women who are currently not married, highest score is given to her responses because in the absence of her spouse, she should have the ability to take decisions to protect her interests and her family. These decisions should not be imposed upon by any elder member or by any other family members and if that happened, they were subsequently assigned lower values. When decisions are made by any other person on behalf of the women (respondent), chances are her interests may be totally ignored or they may not be given same priority as those of men or other elderly females in the family.

**Table 1:** Indicators for constructing autonomy index

Questions	Responses for currently married	Responses for currently not married	Weights given to each response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who decides expenditure on daily items?</li> <li>Who decides purchase of the property / expensive item?</li> <li>Who decides when you fall sick?</li> <li>Who decides when your child falls sick?</li> <li>Permission needed to go to health center?</li> <li>Permission needed to go to visit nearby localities?</li> <li>Permission needed to travel short distances?</li> </ul>	Herself Joint Husband and others	Herself Senior Family member Others in the family	3   2  1

Source: Constructed by author from IHDS II, 2011-2012.

In order to construct autonomy index, two separate decision making and one mobility index are formulated. Decision making on healthcare and financial matters has two indicators respectively while freedom of movement outside the household (alone or escorted) has three indicators. Each of these seven indicators reflects the aspects of autonomy that has been quantified. Since the maximum score that can be obtained from each indicator is 3 and the minimum is 1, the total value of the autonomy index ranges from 1 to 21 (3 multiplied by 7 indicators) when taking into consideration all the variables. These three indices had low to moderate correlation. The final index was then modified to have range between 0 and 1.

$$\text{AUTONOMY INDEX} = (\text{HEALTHCARE INDEX} + \text{HOUSEHOLD DECISION INDEX} + \text{MOBILITY INDEX}) / 21$$

Composite measures were created based on how women recorded their responses for three distinct areas of autonomy: control over their financial resources, decision-making in health care, and the extent of freedom of movement. Four indices were modified ranging from 0 to 1 and were further subdivided into three classes. In constructing the indices, high-medium-

low categories were created by dividing the sample frequency distribution in the indices into approximately one-third. Values 0.5 and below were termed as 'low' autonomy; between 0.51 and 0.7 as 'medium' level of autonomy and all values above 0.7 were designated as 'high' autonomy level.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were estimated for each of the three autonomy measures separately and for the autonomy index, for married and currently not married women. Cronbach's alpha basically helps to understand whether it is justifiable to interpret scores that have been aggregated together. The range of the coefficient varies from 0 to 1, 0 being no consistency and 1 perfect consistency. There are different reports about the acceptable values of alpha, ranging from 0.70 to 0.95. A minimum value of 0.7 is required to accept reliability of data (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). For comparing groups, values between 0.7 and 0.8 are regarded as satisfactory. For clinical application, much higher values are needed (Bland & Altman, 1997; Drost, 2011). For example, if the coefficient value is 0.826 (see table 2), it would mean that 82% of the variance in the composite scores associated with the 7 indicators, are reliable while the rest is considered standard error.

The result indicates a fair to good internal reliability for the measures when combined.

**Table 2:** Value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient for autonomy indices

Indices	Married	Not married
Mobility Index	0.754	0.919
Health Care Index	0.679	0.763
Economic Decision-Making Index	0.838	0.859
<b>AUTONOMY INDEX</b>	<b>0.702</b>	<b>0.826</b>

*Source: Calculated by author from IHDS II, 2011-2012.*

The estimated internal reliabilities for mobility index and economic index are quite high for currently unmarried women, but the healthcare index is a little higher than 0.7. Together, the autonomy index shows a value of 0.826, indicating the reliability for this index is high. A similar result was obtained by Bloom et.al, (2001) where they explained the questions related to finance and freedom of movement were "more context oriented, which probably led to more reliable measures."

However, for married women the coefficient is just above 0.7. This low coefficient can be due to greater observations in this category.

## Methodological Issues in Measuring Autonomy

Autonomy is like two sides of a coin. Most studies that examined women's decision-making abilities are based on surveys obtained from the wife's or women's perception only. It almost always ignores the other side of the coin. It gives a better picture on how that idea is perceived by both sexes in the marriage and outside it. It will be interesting to note the discrepancy of each spouse's perception and the observed reality. Only a handful of studies have looked into the perception of autonomy by both spouses (Niraula & Morgan, 1996; Jejeebhoy, 2002; Ghuman, Lee, & Smith, 2006; Munro, Kebede, Tarazona-Gomez & Verschoor, 2013).

Measuring autonomy should be done with caution as researchers sometimes make arbitrary conclusion on choices related to family decisions. The decision-making variables vary from

society to society and also according to the perception and understanding of the researcher. The level at which the decision is made is also difficult to capture as there are various degrees of specificity of decisions made. It is to be kept in mind that not all decisions are taken by the same person; it varies based on the importance of the decision making.

Scholars are not unanimous about the construction of indices to measure autonomy. Some give equal weight to the decisions (assuming all decisions are of equal importance) and varying weight to the person who takes the decisions (Kishor, 1995), while others evaluate them based on the degree of importance attached to the decisions and with what frequency they are made (Drovandi & Salvini, 2004).

## Findings

In Indian society, female leadership positions are not common because of entrenched patriarchal values - where women's role are only to nurture the family. While male-headed household are more common, different circumstances give rise to female headship in different societies of the world. The stigmatized concept is that the 'bread winner' of the family is man and hence he is entitled to make all the decisions and 'manage the money' on behalf of his family, while the woman is the 'homemaker' whose sole responsibility is to care and tend the family. There is an inbuilt imperative for the constraints on women to guard and honor the family and the household tradition. According to DHS comparative studies (Ayad, Barrare & Otto, 1997), headship is assigned by the household respondent, which often turns out to be the oldest male member of the family in most cases, regardless of him being the provider or primary decision maker. This is also typical in large traditional Indian households.

**Table 3:** Characteristics of women above 49 years

Characteristics	Currently married	Currently not married
<b>Household</b>		
Head of Household (%)	16.0	84.0
Family Size	5.1	4.0
Mean Children	3.6	3.1
Lives with Mother in law (%)	67.7	32.4
Lives with Father in law (%)	82.8	17.2
<b>Socio-economic</b>		
Mean Age at marriage (years)	17.4	17.1
Literacy (%)	45.6	40.1
Completed secondary education (%)	10.1	8.2
Practice ghunghat/burkah (%)	54.1	44.7
Cash in hand	90.4	95.1
Working for wages/salary (%)	49.8	57.5
Ownership of house currently residing in (%)	23.3	45.4
Own or cultivate land (%)	52.6	47.0

Source: Calculated by author from IHDS II, 2011-2012.

The table above shows a comparison of socio-economic parameters among Indian households. The percentage of female headed households is much higher when she is widowed or separated or divorced. Even though age has been fixed at 49 years and above, female heads in conjugal union is remarkably low (only 3.6% when the age restriction is removed). The chances of married women to be the head reduces if she has to compete with her husband, father in law and mother in law. Around 58% female-headed households are

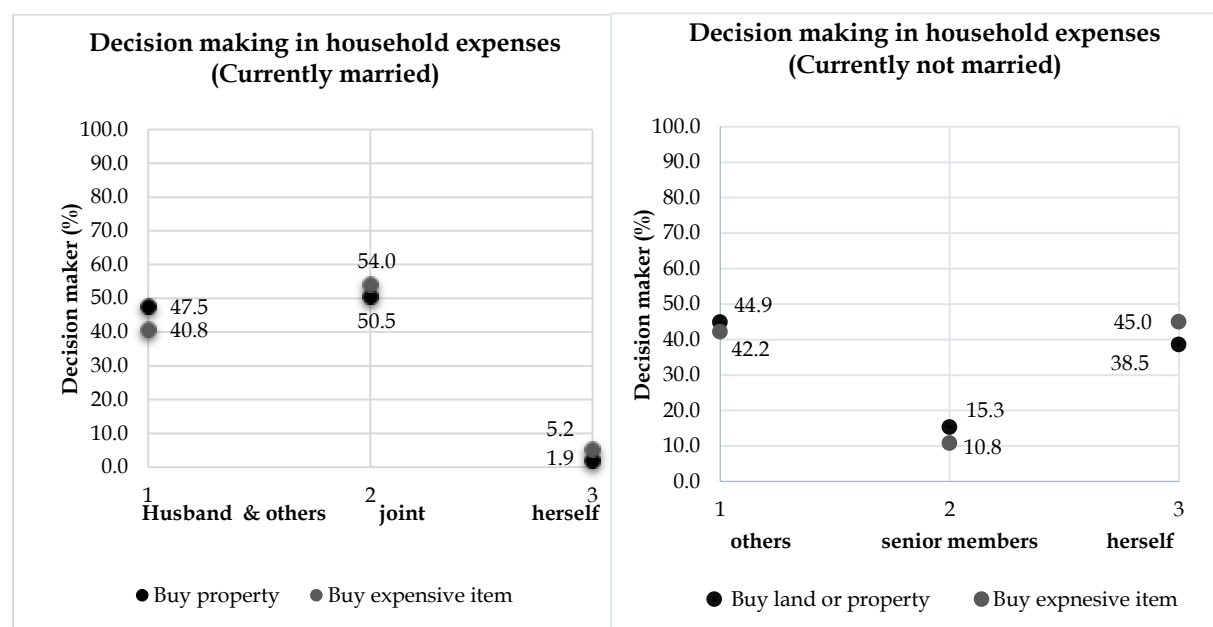
single households in India (Census of India, 2011). Restrictions are imposed such as a total or partial veiling of the head and face (purdah or ghunghat) with saree or hijab; a strict code of behavior and attire governs any interaction with men. Here, it is seen that married women (about 54% of them practice ghunghat/burkha) are more bound by compulsions of seclusion than who are not and this can be a major contributing factor to women's autonomy.

## Decision Making Patterns

Active decision making for the welfare of the family and for herself along with freedom of movement are the first steps to attain a powerful position in the family. Decisions on what to cook daily and other culinary activities have been stereotyped as the most important work for women. Around 80% of women decide what to cook on daily basis (IHDS II, 2011-2012). Men are believed not to interfere in these matters, as they should be more interested in managing the financial and regulatory decisions. Needless to say, control on economic decisions involving major expenditure, such as buying land or other property or expensive item, the percentage share is very low for married women (around 7%), compared with currently not married women (68%). It is seen that around 47% married women and 87% currently not married women have a sole decision on whether to join the labor force (IHDS II, 2011-2012). However, decision to join workforce can be poverty driven or needs-based rather than a willful expression of her economic independence (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001).

### *Decision making patterns in family expenses*

**Figure 2:** Decision making patterns in family expenses



Source: Calculated by author from IHDS II, 2011-2012.

Figure (2) is a graphical presentation of who (in the family) makes the major decisions, separately for currently married (left) and currently not married women (right). The graphs show decision making on household expenses and purchase of property. For currently married women, decisions on purchase of expensive item is mainly taken jointly (54%). In

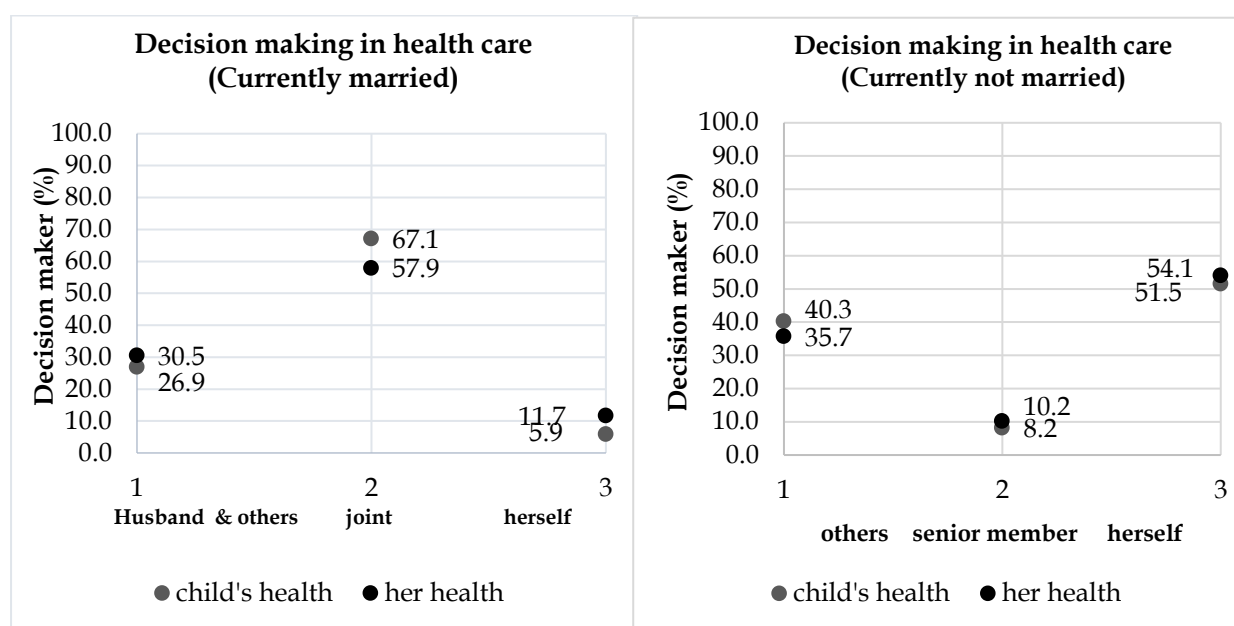


terms of decision-making regarding purchase of property, the husband's decision accounts for 48%, and joint decision with other members in the family account for 50%. Hence, women have very little autonomy in this decision. Men are given more credit in understanding risks involved in buying a property. It may happen that the joint decision might not be joint in truest form, as the respondent might unconsciously submit to the husband's will and hence, reflects a high decision-making share. This fact can be justified as in both the categories the decision taken by the respondent herself is below 10% while decisions taken by the husband account for more than 40%.

Interestingly, the shares are much higher in case of currently not married women since the major competition, that is the spouse, is absent and the controlling effect of the spouse is clearly mirrored among married women. For women who are currently not married, decisions regarding expensive item is mainly taken by the respondent herself (45%), while decisions on property purchase is taken by other members (46%) in the family who could be her children or in-laws or siblings (less than her age).

### *Decision making patterns regarding health care*

**Figure 3:** Decision making patterns regarding health care

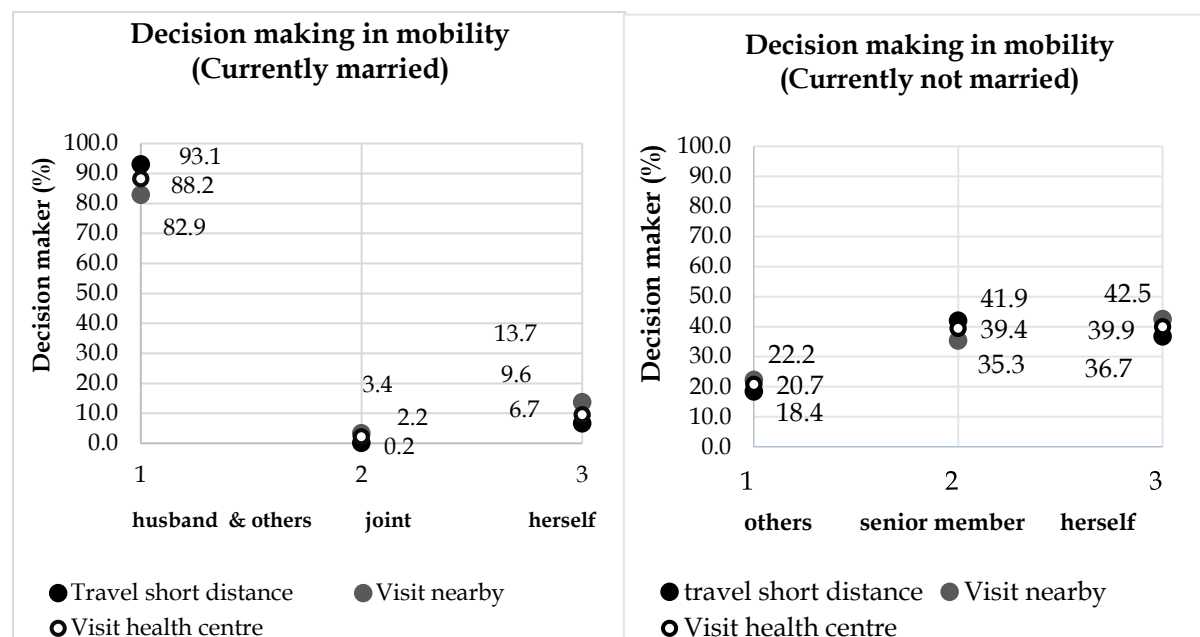


Source: Calculated by author from IHDS II, 2011-2012.

Figure (3) elucidates the decision-making patterns regarding health care of the respondents and her children. When women are in marriage, decision on child health are taken together, which is well justified, but she does not make sole decision on her child's health. This is important because she should have the authority to take decisions on behalf of her husband when he is absent. However, decisions on her own health should also be taken together. A joint decision indicates good inter-spousal communication and it is believed that her views are also given equal importance as her husband - a much desired score for higher levels of autonomy. However, decisions regarding health taken by husband and others remains significantly higher than the decisions taken by the women herself. Women who are currently not married mostly make health care decisions by themselves. However, other members in the family also have considerable (around 40%) say in regards to the children's health.

## Decision making patterns of mobility

**Figure 4:** Decision making patterns of mobility



Source: Calculated by author from IHDS II, 2011-2012.

In a gender-stratified society, control over women's sexuality and physical movement is the ultimate means of curbing their freedom. Even till this day, most women (irrespective of age and marital status) are not allowed to go out without permission from elder family members and/or husband. Even if she is allowed to, she would rarely go unescorted. Outside the house, a "woman's movement is restricted in distance, duration and purpose" (Mandelbaum, 1986). From Figure 4, husband and other members of the family have the most say in determining the women's movement. It is more of husband's decision if she has to travel a short distance (93%). There is practically no decision taken jointly when a married woman has to go outside the house. Her own decision-making authority to go out is very low as well (below 10%). Her own decision only applies when she visits nearby shops or locality (18%). It can be said that when women's mobility is controlled by her husband, it may lead to lower levels of their autonomy.

For currently not married women, decisions to go outside are mainly taken by herself and senior members of the family. She has more say only when she has to visit neighboring places (44%), but if she has to travel longer distance alone, the permission of senior family members is must (43%). It is to be noted that when the woman is married, about 80% of her mobility is controlled by her husband and elderly members in the household. However, in the permanent absence of her spouse, she acquires some freedom of movement as the decision is taken by herself and also senior members of the family. About 40% of currently not married women takes decision by herself regarding her mobility compared with only 10% of currently married women.

**Table 4:** Levels of Women Autonomy

Levels of autonomy (on a scale of 0 to 1)	Currently married women (%)	Currently not married women (%)
Low (0.5 and Below)	44.9	21.1
Medium (0.51-0.7)	48.7	25.8
High (Above 0.7)	6.7	53.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,497</b>	<b>744</b>

Table 4 shows the share of currently married women and currently not married women in each level of the constructed autonomy scale, ranging from 0 to 1. Only 6.7% women have high autonomy when they are married but the figure is 53% when they are not in marital union. For currently not married women, the share increases with their autonomy levels. But, for currently married women, mid-level autonomy accounts for the highest share. This is likely because of the shared score given to joint decisions. However, the share is strikingly low in high autonomy level. This statistic suggest that marriage and its associated norms still restrict women's movement in India specifically her ability to take decisions independently for herself and for her family.

### *Autonomy and women headship in family*

Generally, there are two types of female-headed households which is a product of socio-economic conditions and gender ideologies of the affected society: a) female-headed households where the sole economic provider is a women and where there is permanent absence of male adult who are earning is called a *de facto female headed household*. In this case, the female head is either widowed or separated/ divorced, or there is an adult male member with some disability; b) headship is assigned by default to female adults when her husband migrates for economic pursuits. She is given the responsibility of managing her family on behalf of her husband. Such female heads are 'acting heads' of the family and such households are called *de jure female headed or pseudo female headed households*. In India, the percentages of a *de facto female headed household* is much higher.

**Figure 5:** Percentage of women based on their headship status and levels of autonomy

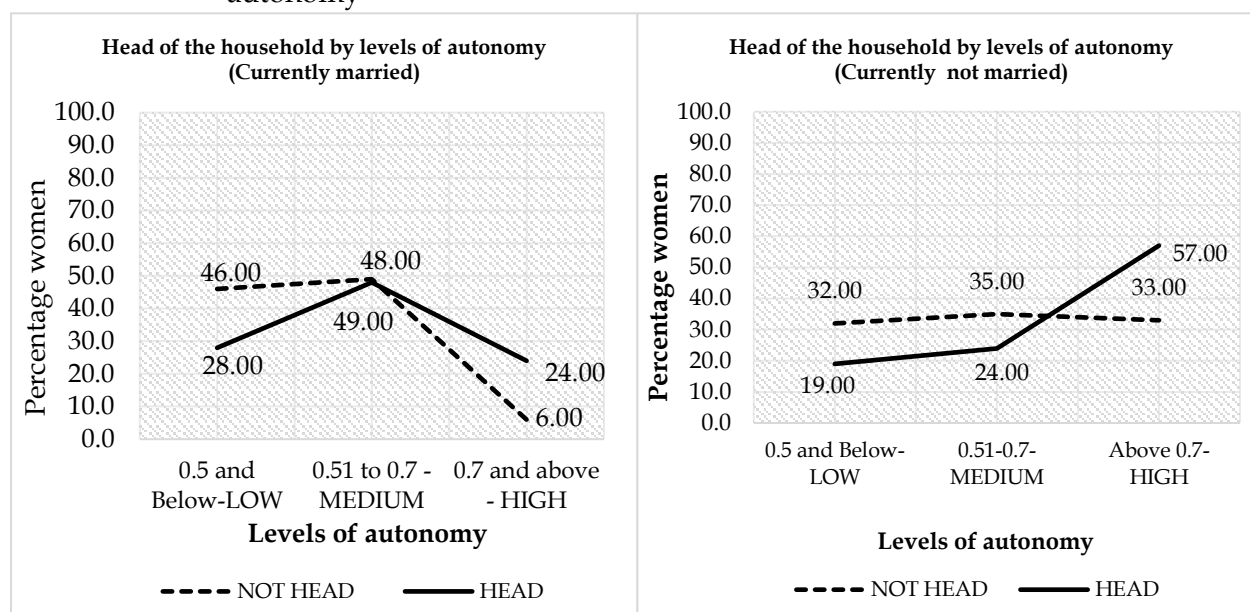


Figure (5) shows the autonomy levels of female head of the household by marital status. It points to the fact there are few women heads belonging to the higher levels of autonomy when in marital union. There is low level of autonomy when a woman is married, irrespective of her headship status. In marriage, when the woman is head of the household she has a higher level of autonomy. This can also be the case of de facto female-headed households, where the spouse (or son) is currently absent in the household. The scenario changes when women are not in marriages anymore as 84% of the total women who are not in marital union are heads of the household (see table 3). As the level of autonomy increases, percentage share of women also increases with 57% of female heads having high autonomy, while only 19% of women have low levels of autonomy. Around 33% of women have higher autonomy when they are not head which indicates that without the covert pressures of marriage norms, a woman is likely to have greater decision making abilities. It can be inferred that marriage plays an important role in determining levels of autonomy along with the headship status in the family.

### *Factors influencing of levels of female autonomy*

The main objective of this paper was to understand how a woman can become the head of the household and the importance of her autonomy is in realizing a powerful position in household. Since there are three possible levels of outcome from autonomy (low, medium and high), multinomial logistic regression was employed to see the factors that influence the scales of autonomy. Two separate regression models for currently married and currently not married women, are constructed to explore the effects of the household, social and regional characteristics. Multinomial logistic regression is a multivariate test that have adjusted odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals in each regression output tables. Multinomial regression rather than ordinal regression were applied due to dependent variables being in specific order (low to high). Each category reflects the effect of the predictors on the probability of success in that category, in comparison to the reference category (here, 'high' autonomy level).

This analysis suggests autonomy is controlled by region rather than religion or caste in the country. It is important to know the structure of the family headed by a man and a woman. Size of the household is expected to reflect the burden of familial responsibility on the head. The average household size for female headed household is always lower than male headed ones across all states. The main reason is because the male counterpart is not present in the family (Bongaarts, 2001). Households with single member are higher in case of females than males. Female living alone is higher in rural areas as there are single widowed women, women left behind by out-migrated males or they are abandoned by their husbands or sons. Family size has a significant relationship in both the cases. The chances of having higher autonomy increases with decreasing family size in both marital status. Autonomy has to be studied through the variations at regional and sub-regional level which depicts variations of society, caste, kinship and marriage systems. Since female autonomy studied here is in relation with women's marital status, it is important to know the nature of matrimonial system in India and its variation across cultural spaces. Three marriage regimes are found in India:

1. North India which practices the custom of exogamy where girls are married off at younger age to those in same or higher 'social rank', and some sent to distant villages. The right to choose spouse is practically absent and the age gap between the couple is usually high. This exerts more restriction on the women's autonomy.
2. South India in general, has a custom of cross-cousin marriages or within extended families, higher age at marriage and close natal ties. Therefore, women have greater

autonomy and decision-making power in households. Marriage between cousins is also common among Muslim communities in India.

3. Matrilineal kinship system as seen in north eastern states and south west Kerala. They have a variety of marriage types and residence patterns. Autonomy is very high among women in gender equal (egalitarian) societies (Uberoi, 1993; Desai, 1994).

Both regression models depict that work participation of women does not necessarily increase their autonomy. Not married women working for wages is much higher, as shown earlier. It can be due to two reasons - either they have more freedom of movement and less obligations to maintain marital norms, or due the absence of a male as primary economic provider and she is forced to work to maintain the family. It may so happen that they are working outside because of depressed economic condition and it is not a willful participation in the labor market. In this study, when all other variables are held constant, residence, religion and caste (respectively) are not significant contributors to women's autonomy.

**Table 5:** Multinomial logistic regression showing effect of currently married women's background characteristics on levels of female autonomy

Background Characteristics	Low Autonomy vs. High Autonomy <sup>REF</sup>		Medium Autonomy vs. High Autonomy <sup>REF</sup>	
	Coefficient Value	Odds Ratio	Coefficient Value	Odds Ratio
<b>Age At Marriage</b>	-0.019	0.731	-0.017	0.983
<b>Head Of the Household</b>				
Not Head	2.136	8.467***	1.608	4.992***
Head <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Family Size</b>				
2 Members	-1.067	0.344***	-0.312	0.732
3-4 Members	-0.308	0.735	-0.023	0.978
Above 4 Members <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Level of Education</b>				
Illiterate	0.487	1.628*	0.362	1.436
Up to Primary	0.163	1.178	-0.008	0.992
Secondary and Above <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Work Participation</b>				
Not Working	0.006	1.006	0.055	1.056
Working <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Spouse's Education</b>				
Illiterate	-0.380	0.684	-0.277	0.758
Primary	-0.444	0.642*	-0.341	0.711*
Secondary and Above <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Spouse's Work Status</b>				
Not Working	0.12	1.127	0.116	1.123
Working <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Regions</b>				
Northern Region	0.842	2.321***	0.239	1.270
Western Region	-0.226	0.798	-0.108	0.897
Eastern Region	0.076	1.079	-0.268	0.765
North-East Region	0.433	1.542	0.020	1.020
Central Region	2.545	12.739***	2.151	8.589***
Southern Region <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Residence</b>				
Rural	0.233	1.269	0.037	1.037
Urban <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Mother in law in Hh</b>				
Present in the same Hh	1.158	3.183**	0.697	2.007**
Not present in the same Hh <sup>REF</sup>				

Background Characteristics	Low Autonomy vs. High Autonomy <sup>REF</sup>		Medium Autonomy vs. High Autonomy <sup>REF</sup>	
	Coefficient Value	Odds Ratio	Coefficient Value	Odds Ratio
<b>Religion</b>				
Hindu	0.245	1.278	0.239	1.270
Muslim	0.385	1.470	0.251	1.285
Others <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Caste</b>				
Non-Scheduled Castes	-0.058	0.994	-0.050	0.952
Scheduled Castes/Tribes <sup>REF</sup>				

Source: Calculated from IHDS II, 2011-2012.

Note: - REF- Reference category; Hh- Household; \* $p < 0.100$ ; \*\* $p < 0.050$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.005$ ; N= 3497

Table 5 shows that when all factors are controlled, age at marriage has no significant relationship with the levels of autonomy of a married woman. Headship status however, shows some interesting results. A woman when married is more likely not to be the head of the household with low and medium autonomy when all other factors are kept constant. The odds ratio shows higher values significant at 99%. A woman is 34.4% less likely to have low autonomy when there are two members in the family. However, this result is not significant when women with medium and high autonomy are compared. The presence of mother in-law in the same household is significant at 95%. The chances of a woman having lower and medium autonomy is greater when her mother in-law is residing in the same household. A married woman is not only submissive to the men, but also to her mother in-law or to any other older women in the household, and she perceives this as a decorum which she in turn would exercise on her daughter in law (Dyson & Moore, 1983; Vatuk, 1987; Kandiyoti, 1988; Das Gupta, 1996).

In terms of education, woman with no education is more likely to have lower autonomy. However, spouse's education provides some inferences. A woman is less likely to have a low level of autonomy (64.2%) if her husband has completed up to primary (class 8) level of education. This increases to 71% when the woman has medium level of autonomy. Exposure to education may change perceptions of the husband regarding power relations in a family.

A mentioned earlier, in India, different marriage regimes, characterized by socio-cultural patterns, are found in fixed geographic regions. Women from northern and central part of the country are more likely to have low autonomy compared with those from the south. Strict and binding patriarchal family laws operate in both central and northern regions. Women usually have little education, restricted mobility and virtually no say in marriages. Along with caste and class hierarchies, gender and age play very important role. In contrast to this, the south Indian marriage regimes allows a relatively greater space for women to exercise their choices. Greater access to education, higher age at marriage, close natal ties and marriages within extended families work in favor of a woman's autonomy.

**Table 6:** Multinomial logistic regression showing effect of currently not married women's background characteristics on levels of their autonomy

Background Characteristics	Low Autonomy vs. High Autonomy <sup>REF</sup>		Medium Autonomy vs. High Autonomy <sup>REF</sup>	
	Coefficient Value	Odds Ratio	Coefficient Value	Odds Ratio
<b>Age at Marriage</b>	0.011	1.011	0.011	1.011
<b>Head of The Household</b>				
Not Head	-0.93	0.395***	-0.857	0.425***
Head <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Family Size</b>				
Alone	-1.842	0.159***	-1.261	0.283***
2 Members	-1.051	0.349***	-0.106	0.899
3-4 Members	-0.371	0.69	-0.096	0.908
Above 4 Members <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Level of Education</b>				
Illiterate	0.619	1.858	-0.032	0.968
Up to Primary	0.827	2.286**	0.06	1.061
Secondary and Above <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Work Participation</b>				
Not Working	0.149	1.161	-0.004	0.996
Working <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Regions</b>				
Northern Region	0.867	2.38***	0.683	1.98**
Western Region	0.153	1.166	0.544	1.723**
Eastern Region	0.065	1.067	0.522	1.686**
North-East Region	-0.94	0.391	-0.435	0.648
Central Region	1.189	3.284***	0.602	1.826
Southern Region <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Residence</b>				
Rural	-0.049	0.952	0.032	1.032
Urban <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Elderly person in Hh</b>				
Present in the same Hh	-0.447	0.64	-0.423	0.655
Not present in the same Hh <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Religion</b>				
Hindu	0.089	1.093	0.339	1.403
Muslim	0.015	1.015	0.213	1.237
Others <sup>REF</sup>				
<b>Caste</b>				
Non-Scheduled Castes	0.113	1.119	0.109	1.115
Scheduled Castes/Tribes <sup>REF</sup>				

Source: Calculated from IHDS II, 2011-2012.

Note: - <sup>REF</sup>. Reference category; Hh- Household; \* $p < 0.100$ ; \*\* $p < 0.050$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.005$ ;  $N = 744$

When all other factors are kept constant, it is 93% less likely that a woman with low autonomy is head of the household and 85% in case of woman with medium level of autonomy compared with those having higher autonomy levels. In simpler terms, if she is not currently married, she is more likely to be the head, having higher autonomy. It has been shown 83% of the total women who are not in marital union are heads of the household. As the level of autonomy increases, the percentage share of women also increases. Around 57% of women who are heads have high autonomy, while only 19% in low category and only 35% of women have higher autonomy when they are not the head.

There is a consistent pattern that women's autonomy decreases with an increase in family size. Only in cases of currently not married women, education has some significant outcome on autonomy. It is 82.7% more likely for women with only primary education (up to class 8) to have lower levels of autonomy compared with women who have achieved education above class 10. This comparison does not hold true for women in the medium level of autonomy.

Keeping other factors controlled, region again has a significant relation with levels of autonomy.

## Discussion

The very definition of the term 'head of the household' implies that the person plays an important role in decision making and welfare of the family. In other words, the person has the ability to influence and control opinion of other family members. However, it is not only the economic provider who assumes such leadership role, but it can also be the oldest member (irrespective of sex) of the family who has managerial attributes. The social systems that emphasize role of family and kinship affect women's lives in varying degrees and also in different social and cultural settings. Women's lives in India are rooted in their domestic sphere and so family and kinship structures are the key factors defining the extent of their autonomy. The hierarchy of authority in the household is governed by age and sex, with the older over the younger, and men over women. Marriage being the most important rite of passage in women's lives is also a medium through which autonomy is realized.

Generally, household members identify the eldest member in the family as the 'head of the household' (Kishor & Neitzel, 1996). The position of a member in the family is thus hierarchical by virtue of age, generation and gender. It has been documented in many studies (Rosenhouse, 1989; Folbre, 1991) that women heads are mostly older than their male counterparts. The share of younger female heads is less, which is highly contingent upon her marital status. Hence, age is the pivotal demographic attribute in determining the headship status in the family. The mean age for female and male heads in India is around 53 years and 49 years respectively (IHDS II, 2011-2012). The males in the family achieve headship status four years earlier and additionally women have to acquire it not only through their experiences gathered over years, but also by virtue of their marital status. As the age increases, the chances of widowhood also increases for a woman because of her advantages in life expectancy.

Both entry into and exit from a marital union alters the existing power dynamics in the household. Males are favored in marriage to be a head, but it is not so in the case of women, as the role of a woman is subservient to the man in marriage, cutting across caste, class and religion and also to some extent economic identity (Zuo & Tang, 2000). Women on the other hand, gain advantage in headship position when they exit the marriage. Age and marital status are both important demographic determinants in assuming leadership positions in the family (also in society). After her spouse's death, losing her socio-cultural identity has a much wider ramification than losing a husband (which is her personal grief). The primary reasons for the increase in female headed households are seen as absence of male residence (widowhood, divorced/separated), migration of male members for long periods, emergence of nuclear families, and the presence of a male member with some disability. While 94% of male household heads are married and have their spouse living with them, roughly two thirds (68%) of female household heads do not have their spouse present in the household. Thus, widowed and divorced/separated women make up the majority of all female household heads.

Headship in India is certainly not based on economic considerations. Most of the heads are older and are mainly ceremonial in many cases. This paper hence, has argued the autonomy and chance of being the head of the household is more for women, when they are not in marital union and when they are in higher age bracket. It can also be inferred that for a woman the chances of being head increases with age when she is less likely to have a spouse. Regions



play very important role in case of marriage patterns. Societies in both northern and central parts of India show low levels of autonomy among their women, marriage notwithstanding. This certainly affects the women's decision making abilities.

It is also worthwhile to mention that this study is not free of limitations. Due to obscurity of income, employment status and consumption related data, the economic dynamics are not captured. An earning family head would provide a more valid picture on the nature of headship. Again, due to improper definition and clubbing of terms in the data, some distinctions were not possible to make, for example, divorced and separated are treated as one. Hence, many such groups were treated as homogenous even when in reality they were not.

## Conclusion

The cultural history of India reveals women face more challenges in all aspects of their private and public spheres when compared with men. The family roles perceived by men and women based on their gender ideologies are very different and are rooted in strong patriarchal structures. Decision making abilities are distinguishable from women with no spouse in the family with the women who are married and they essentially differ based on age and generation. This study has explored pathways of realizing family headship for females in an otherwise male dominated household. Levels of autonomy also reflect the existence of hierarchies in family, specifically in the area of decision making processes in the households, a situation relatively better for women who are currently not in marital union. In more gender egalitarian societies like that of the north-eastern part of the country, women's levels of autonomy are much higher, irrespective of their marital and family headship status.

Findings of this study show autonomy is higher among female heads who are not currently married. However, it cannot be said that increasing autonomy allows a woman to assume 'head position' in the family, especially when her marital status remains the most controlling factor. The results also show that influence and control at interpersonal level are low when the women are married. It is somewhat relaxed when she is not and she has the platform to exercise her choice. High levels of autonomy do not automatically translate into assuming a powerful position in the family. Smaller family size may promote greater autonomy, but it can be so that in name of autonomy, she is being given all the responsibilities of household decision making. Absolute autonomy is also not encouraged because, if the decisions are taken for the welfare of households, the opinion of other members should also play an important role. This holds true particularly for joint decision making when the husband is present in the family.

There is no predefined method to capture the multidimensional aspects of autonomy and this makes it difficult to quantify and capture its role in specific outcomes. This study has looked at when and under what circumstances a family is headed by a woman. It is very important to enhance and establish women's rights, access and control over social and economic resources. The importance of a female head being autonomous is only understood when she exercises her choices rationally and consciously for herself and for the welfare of her family without any overt or covert pressures. It is not about exercising absolute power in family decisions but rather, the focus is on equalizing the gendered hierarchies and power structures within the family that are perceived to exist between the 'head' and the rest of the family members.

Even though scholars question the validity of the term 'head of the household' it still, holds a hierarchical meaning in Indian family systems. The term definitely reinforces gender stereotypical roles within the family. The socio-economic conditions and power dynamics also show difference among a male headed and female headed household in various studies. Simply abolishing the term will not be helpful until the heteronormative society does away with gender inequalities and power relations. Choosing to be empowered/disempowered, autonomous/not autonomous and head or not head of the household, should be the ultimate expression of gender equality. The status of female heads will ameliorate if the overall conditions of the females across regions, class and caste are improved in the country.

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