



Extended Abstract

THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL MARITAL PAIRING ON MUSLIM WOMEN'S AGENCY IN INDIA

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Introduction

The influence of education on marital dynamics has grown in importance given the changing socioeconomic landscape of India (Jejeebhoy, 2010). The educational attainment of the Muslim minority in the country has gradually improved, especially for women. However, there is still a dearth of research on the interaction between women's agency, marriage, and education within this religious minority. This study explores the ways in which the pairing of spouses based on education, affects the agency of women in Muslim marriages. Agency is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them (Kabeer, 1999). Examining the effects of educational pairing on Muslim women's autonomy, decision-making, and social mobility is essential given their increasing access to education. This will help us better understand how education alters gender norms and traditional marital and household dynamics, particularly within minority religious communities.

Theoretical Focus

The theoretical framework for this study draws on theories of gender stratification and empowerment (example, Amartya Sen's functioning-based approach to empowerment, Naila Kabeer's framework of women's agency). These perspectives highlight how social structures, particularly educational attainment, affect intra-household power dynamics and gender relations. Differential educational pairing has been shown to influence these dynamics, as homogamous (equal educational levels) marriages may foster more egalitarian relationships, while hypergamous (marrying up) or hypogamous (marrying down) unions may reflect and reinforce existing social inequalities. In Muslim communities, where traditional gender roles and religious practices strongly shape social expectations, educational attainment can act as both a transformative and reinforcing force. We hypothesize that education empowers women by enhancing their involvement in household decision-making, enhancing their mobility, and

changing their roles in both public and private domains. The hypothesis is that educational homogamy will be associated with higher levels of agency for Muslim women, while hypergamous and hypogamous marriages may limit or complicate this empowerment.

Data and Methods

The data for the study has been utilised from the fifth round of the National Family and Health Survey (2019-21). The NFHS data provides vital insights into women's health, fertility choices, autonomy, and domestic violence, which are key indicators of agency within marriage. The sample size is 8226. We have only examined educational pairings between heterosexual couples for the purpose of this study.

The primary dependent variable in this study is women's agency, measured through women's employment status, women's health condition, access to digital resources, mass media awareness level, household asset ownership, attitudes towards gender-based violence, women's mobility freedom, and decision-making power. The key independent variable is educational pairing of spouses, classified into four categories: a) Both low (the education level is low of both the spouses); b) Both high (the education level is high of both the spouses); c) Her low his high (woman's education is lower than her husband); and d) Her high his low (woman's education is higher than her husband). Control variables include age, household wealth, region of residence, and caste.

To begin, we have selected eight indicators for women, keeping in mind that those indicators can be used as proxies of agency altogether. One thing to note is that these indicator variables have been constructed considering several functioning abilities of the female individuals. After selecting the functioning abilities, we converted them into binary ones and merged them into indicator variables. The capability approach has had a significant impact on our perception of well-being. So, instead of using a just income-based approach to capture agency, we have used a functioning-based approach (Sen, 1985). For analysis, we begin with a descriptive analysis to provide an initial overview of how various indicators of women's agency, such as household asset ownership, women's mobility freedom, and decision-making power, differ across educational pairings. Subsequently, we have calculated the overall score of women's agencies for each educational pairing, combining all eight of the agency indicators. We have further planned to utilize Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to identify underlying factors that encapsulate the dimensions of women's agency, reducing data complexity and aiding in interpretation. These principal components will be then used in regression analysis to assess the impact of educational pairing on women's agency, controlling for relevant variables. Finally, we aspire to conduct a comparative analysis to explore differences in women's agency of different educational pairings in comparison to the majority Hindu women, ensuring the robustness of our findings through subgroup analyses. As of now, the results of the descriptive statistics and overall agency score have been focused.

Preliminary Findings

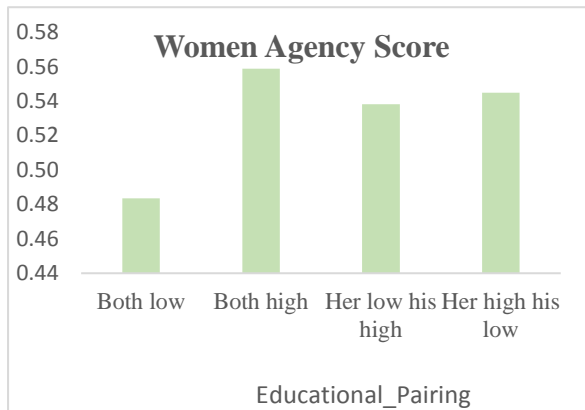
The preliminary findings suggest that spousal education pairing significantly influences women's agency. And education is positively associated with increased agency for Muslim women.

Descriptive Table of Various Women's Agency related outcomes across Educational Pairing

	Employment Status of Women		
Educational pairing	Not Working	Working	N
Both low	81.17	18.83	7,302
Both high	82.95	17.05	217
Her low his high	83.4	16.6	476
Her high his low	84.85	15.15	231
	Women's Health Condition		
	Unhealthy	Healthy	N
Both low	61.02	38.98	7,302
Both high	58.99	41.01	217
Her low his high	61.34	38.66	476
Her high his low	54.98	45.02	231
	Access to Digital Resources		
	No Digital Agency	Has Digital Agency	N
Both low	44.18	55.82	7,302
Both high	7.83	92.17	217
Her low his high	21.43	78.57	476
Her high his low	8.23	91.77	231
	Mass Media Awareness Level		
	Not aware	Aware	N
Both low	33.4	66.6	7,302
Both high	1.84	98.16	217
Her low his high	11.34	88.66	476
Her high his low	6.06	93.94	231
	Household Asset Ownership		
	Has Asset Ownership	No Asset Ownership	N
Both low	64	36	7,302
Both high	60.83	39.17	217
Her low his high	60.29	39.71	476
Her high his low	67.1	32.9	231
	Attitude towards Gender-based violence		
	Non-liberal	liberal	N
Both low	51.67	48.33	7,302
Both high	60.83	39.17	217
Her low his high	55.46	44.54	476
Her high his low	60.17	39.83	231
	Women's Mobility Freedom		
	Free mobility	Restricted Mobility	N
Both low	43.44	56.56	7,302
Both high	41.94	58.06	217
Her low his high	42.44	57.56	476
Her high his low	48.48	51.52	231
	Autonomy in Decision-Making		
	No Autonomy	Has Autonomy	N

Both low	34.24	65.76	7,302
Both high	37.79	62.21	217
Her low his high	33.82	66.18	476
Her high his low	34.2	65.8	231

It is observed that women in both low-education pairings face lower employment (81% not working) and poorer health (61% unhealthy), with limited access to digital resources (44%), and mass media (66%). Conversely, both high-education pairings exhibit higher digital agency (92%) and mass media awareness (98%). Women in "her high, his low" pairings show the highest asset ownership (67%) and better health (45%)



The graph presents the overall women's agency scores across different educational pairings between spouses. Here it is again found that women in partnerships where both have low education exhibit the lowest agency score (approximately 0.46), reflecting limited autonomy and decision-making power. On the other hand, couples where both partners are highly educated show the highest agency score, around 0.56, indicating a significant increase in women's empowerment. In mixed

educational pairings, the score is slightly lower for women with less education than their husbands ("her low, his high") at 0.52, while the score is higher when the woman is more educated than her spouse ("her high, his low") at 0.54.

These findings highlight that women's agency tends to improve when both partners have higher education, with substantial differences observed across the pairings. However, non-liberal attitudes towards gender-based violence and restricted mobility persist across all pairings, indicating that while education improves material and informational access, cultural and traditional constraints remain.

Expected findings

From the results of multivariate regression models, it is expected that there will be significant variation in the impact of educational pairing on women's agency across caste groups, differential spousal age gap, income levels, household size, region, and urban/rural status. Additionally, comparative analysis will prove insight on how minority women's agency is impacted by the differential educational pairing of spouses compared to the majority women group (that is, Hindu women in the case of India).

Conclusion

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature on spousal educational pairing and its impact on women's empowerment, focusing on Muslim minorities in India. By examining the influence of educational pairing on women's agency, the research provides critical insights into gender and social dynamics within Muslim marriages. It also explores how spousal educational pairing interacts with socio-economic factors such as wealth and urban-rural residency in shaping women's agency.

The findings will have implications for policymakers, particularly regarding educational programs aimed at promoting gender equality in socially conservative communities. Additionally, the study offers valuable perspectives on the transformative role of education in reshaping gender roles within Muslim marriages in India.

Reference:

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