

Women's Empowerment and Associated Age-Related Factors

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Out of the eight International Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set for the year 2015, women's empowerment ranked third from the top (UN, 2005). This goal included age-related and other factors that would play crucial role in the empowerment process of women. In order to assess many factors associated with this goal for Pakistani women, a sample ($N = 388$) of women, age range 21-49 year was taken from Lahore, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, and Multan. Association of women's empowerment with their chronological age, age at marriage, conjugal duration, and age difference from husband were assessed. Separate ANOVAs using quasi-experimental designs revealed; increasing age in women increased their empowerment (Jejeebhoy, 2000); similarly, increase in conjugal duration increased women's empowerment. However, women's age at marriage and age-difference from their husbands showed no significant differences in empowerment.

Keywords: women's empowerment, chronological age, age at marriage, conjugal duration, age difference from husband.

Kabeer (2001) defines empowerment as, "The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." In the context of women, Basu and Basu (2003) defined empowerment as a process that harbors power to women to challenge specific situations. This process generally involves women standing up to prevalent customs and cultures in efficaciously developing their well-being (e.g. Swain & Wallentin, 2008). Basu and Basu (2003) add that women lag behind their male counterparts in all fields everywhere in developing world, hence human development in these countries, especially in Pakistan needs to abate disparities faced by women (Ul-Haq, 1995).

Women in general, experience several kinds of powerlessness in economic and communal life. Their disempowerment is echoed in their inferior job positions, levels of education, income earnings and its control, bargaining powers in marketing about their personal products and labor, participation in decision-making, access to inputs of production and resources and, paid job prospects as compared to their male counterparts (Basu & Basu, 2003). This results in overall dependency of women on male relatives over their span of lives, declining their social status, especially, in some developing economies. Hence economic development theorists endorse if level of women's empowerment is increased, it will help human development in many societies (Basu & Basu, 2003).

The issue of women's empowerment is magnified in developing countries where women are restricted to four walls of their houses, where they take up household responsibilities and are not part of greater economic activities that would enrich their countries. Economic development and women's empowerment are pedantically interwoven with overall development of nations and

economies that reduce inequality between women and men and fast-track the process of development (Duflo, 2012); and when economic and financial resources are available to women, societal and economic development improves, improving the status and freedom of women (Sen, 2000), drop in poverty, enhanced welfare of children, and improvement in domestic efficiency (Quisumbing, 2003).

During 1980s some improvement in women's situation in both rural and urban areas of Pakistan were observed (Alavi, 1991), however, socio-cultural, and economic positions of women remained low, perhaps, due to the deep rooted and intrinsic patriarchal and feudal structures prevailing all over Pakistan. For example, statistics provided by the Government of Pakistan (2013) for the year 2002 reported, that adult literacy rate in women (45%) lagged behind men (69%).

Among many causes, lower position of women in Pakistan is due to the people in the governmental sectors making policies and social scientists. Policies that would empower women are not well formulated or effectively implemented, and only few scientific studies have looked at these issues with keen interest (Alavi, 1991). Hence the present study was undertaken to identify age-related demographic factors that might be associated with women's empowerment. The justification of why age-related factors were the focus of the present study lies in the fact that women's empowerment is likely to differ over the life span as the rights and duties of women change in different phases of age (Jejeebhoy, 2000). Many researchers found chronological age as a significant positive determinant of women's empowerment. Older and mature women are likely to enjoy better status, rights and duties in contrast to that of younger ones (Ethiopian Democratic and Health Survey, 2005). Similarly, for Japanese women, Tijani and Yano (2007) reported as aged progressed current status of women farmers was enhanced as compared to the previous year. This was also true for Bangladeshi women (Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey, 2004) that indicated that women under the age of 20 years were observed to be less empowered as compared with the women who belonged to the age group of 40-44 year (Mostofa, Tareque, Haque & Islam, 2008), a subsequent study confirmed this empowerment to older women

spanning three dimensions, i.e. household decision making, physical mobility, and economic decision making (Haque, Islam, Tareque, & Mostofa, 2011). Nayak and Mahanta (2009) reported Indian women's control over cash earnings (financial empowerment) increased with age (National Family Health Survey-III, Government of India, 2005-06). Acharya, Bell, Simkhada, van Teijlingen and Regmi (2010) reported Nepalese women's age and family structure were the powerful determinants of women's decision making authority. Similar reports about older women's empowerment have emerged from a few studies done in Pakistan (e.g., Khan & Awan, 2011; Sheikh, Meraj & Sadaqat, 2015).

Not only chronological age but age at marriage also has a significant effect on women's empowerment, for example, decision making power on purchasing main household items and decision on own health etc. (Ethiopian Democratic and Health Survey, 2005). Parveen and Leonhauser (2005) found, early marriages (forced and arranged) were an impediment to women's empowerment, where women were deprived of the rights to make choice about their spouses and, their sexual and reproductive rights. Tareque, Haque, Mostofa, & Islam (2007) highlighting the drawbacks of early marriages contended that such marriages were related with many poor communal and physical consequences for young women. On average, young adolescent women, who were married, had lower levels of schooling which resulted in lower self-assurance, negotiating power, and independence of choices etc. Consequently, they had scant reproductive control and underwent higher maternal mortality rates and domestic vehemence and subsequently due to lesser empowerment they were subdued by their husbands. Wiklander and Thede (2010) studying women's empowerment in a few of provinces of India found different outcomes, for example, mature age of women at marriage had a positive and significant marginal effect on their mobility in Tamil Nadu; age at marriage in Uttar Pradesh appeared to cast negative impact on decision making power of women in household domain. Authors argued that marriage at an older age was considered as stigma for a woman. Young wives, who remained in their houses found time and opportunity to share their opinions regarding households matters in contrast to if they went outside their homes for a paid job, which older women did. Different researchers have documented mature age at marriage as a strong determinant of women's empowerment by explaining that women married at early age (teen age) are not able to get to their say recognized in their in-laws. The researchers suggest that women should not be married at early age (e.g., Haque et al., 2011; Rahman Karmaker, & Mia, 2009).

Conjugal duration among other factors is a likely indicator of women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). Increase in the level of empowerment with increasing conjugal duration is based on development of better empathy of women with their husbands and improved married fine-tuning (Parveen & Leonhauser, 2005). Khan and Maan (2008) in a sample of women from Faisalabad (Pakistan) reported that conjugal duration of respondents had statistically significant positive effect on women's empowerment, longer the duration the greater the empowerment.

Very little documented work is available on the variable 'age difference from husband'. Tareque et al. (2007) used secondary data taken from Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (2004) and constructed a women's empowerment index by including women's economic decision-making power, household decision-making power, and freedom of physical mobility. Mean scores of women's empowerment index on demographic variables were calculated. Age difference between married couples in Bangladesh is usually big,

therefore girls, most frequently, get married to considerably older men than themselves, and hence early motherhood is natural phenomenon there. The study revealed that a woman whose age difference from husband was wider was lesser empowered compared to where the age difference from husband was shorter.

Rationale of the Study

Most of the studies carried out in Pakistan to assess the determinants of women's empowerment used secondary data (e.g., Khan & Awan, 2011). Additionally, we found no study that utilized a valid and reliable indigenous measure of women's empowerment in previous studies. Hence the present study aimed to fill these gaps in literature to assess the association of chronological age, age at marriage, conjugal duration, and age difference from husband with women's empowerment. To that, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypotheses

- H₁: Women's empowerment will increase with their chronological age.
- H₂: Older-aged women at the time of marriage will be more empowered than younger-aged women.
- H₃: Longer conjugal duration will result in greater empowerment of women than shorter conjugal duration.
- H₄: Shorter age difference between women and their husbands will be associated with greater empowerment than wider difference in women and their husbands' ages.

Method

Sample

In the present study, multiple samples were conveniently drawn from a single province (Punjab) of Pakistan. Four cities Lahore, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, and Multan were conveniently selected and a sample of 388 (out of 425 see procedure below) women was gathered from multiple towns of these cities. The sample contained married Muslim women of reproductive age range, 21-49 ($M = 35.25$, $SD = 8.78$) year. The never married or divorced or widowed or remarried women were not included in the sample (e.g., Khan & Maan, 2008; Parveen & Leonhauser, 2005). Our sample was restricted to ever married women, because the independent variables essentially measured bargaining power between husband and wife (Lee, 2009).

Independent Variables. The independent variables in the present study included: *Chronological Age* categorized into three groups 21-30, 31-40, and 41-49 years; *Age at Marriage* divided into two groups, 18-27 and 28-35 years; *Conjugal Duration* divided into four groups 2-6, 7-12, 13-18, and 19-25 years; and *Age Difference from Husband* divided into four groups 1-4, 5-8, 9-12, and 13-16 years.

Composite Women's Empowerment Index (CWEI). To measure empowerment we used CWEI (Batoool, 2017). The instrument consisted of four sub-scales that measured economic (control over economic resources), familial (decision making within family and participation in family discussion), socio-cultural (social mobility) and psychological (meaningfulness, impact, self-efficacy, self-determination, and problem focused coping) empowerments. The instrument comprised 33 items where each item was measured on a

5-point Likert-type scale with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The composite score-range of the index was between 33-165, where higher score represented greater empowerment. The reliability of CWEI for the current study was (Cronbach's alpha = .86) was high. Demographic data sheet (Urdu) with independent variables was annexed to the top of CWEI.

Procedure

The researcher personally contacted the participants and during the first meeting, got their verbal consent to complete demographic information and CWEI. At this meeting participants were briefed on the purpose of the research, and relevant response format to complete CWEI was explained. All questions related to the completion of CWEI were answered, and participants were assured about the privacy and confidentiality of their personal or data information. The questionnaires were returned on the same day by most of the respondents, some took two to three days, and only a handful sent the questionnaires by surface mail. Out of 425 questionnaires, 395 were returned and seven questionnaires were discarded (partial completion), leaving 388 participants for the final analysis.

Results

For chronological age, a significant main effect was revealed for empowerment $F(2, 385) = 5.75, p < .003$. Post-hoc Tukey HSD test revealed empowerment in chronologically youngest group (21-30 years) of women ($M = 95.75, SD = 17.31$) was significantly lower ($p < .003$) to the oldest group (41-49 years) of women ($M = 104.47, SD = 18.45$). However, empowerment in young-aged women was not significantly different from middle-aged women (31-40 years) or between middle-aged and older-aged women (For graph of means see Figure 1).

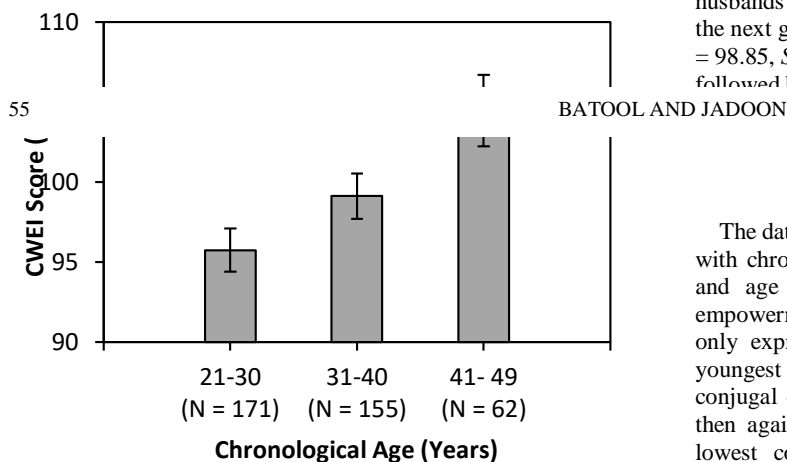


Figure 1. Shows, women's empowerment increased with chronological age; empowerment was significantly ($p < .003$) more for the 41-49 year group compared to 21-30 year group. All other comparisons were not significant.

We could not detect a significant difference ($p > .05$) in empowerment of women who got married at a younger age (18-27 years) than those who married later (28-35 years). However, a significant main effect $F(3, 284) = 4.38, p < .005$, for conjugal duration was revealed, and post-hoc tests showed that empowerment in women ($M = 96.04, SD = 16.38$) with the lowest conjugal duration (2-6 years) was significantly ($p < .02$) lower to empowerment ($M =$

103.20, $SD = 20.56$) of women that had longer (13-18 years) conjugal duration. Understandably, the difference in empowerment in lowest conjugal duration ($M = 96.04, SD = 16.38$) was not significantly ($p < .11$) different from the longest conjugal duration group ($M = 107.00, SD = 20.06$), this we believe was due to small sample size for this group ($n = 14$). No other significant differences were found in other post-hoc comparisons (For graph of means see Figure 2).

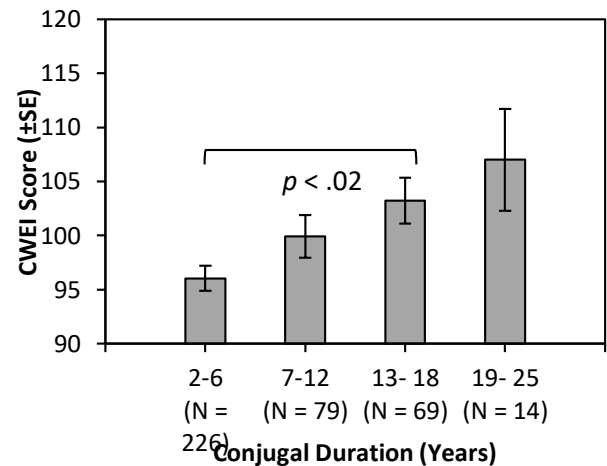


Figure 2. Shows, women's empowerment increased with conjugal duration; empowerment was significantly ($p < .003$) more after 13-18 years compared to 2-6 years. All other comparisons were not significant.

Finally, no main effect was revealed for Age difference from Husband ($p < .80$). Empowerment in women ($M = 100.27, SD = 18.53$) who had the shortest (1-4 years) difference of age from their husbands was more than empowerment ($M = 100.34, SD = 18.47$) for the next group of women (5-8 years), followed by empowerment ($M = 98.85, SD = 17.48$) in women who were next (9-12 years) in order, followed by empowerment ($M = 97.75, SD = 18.00$) in the last group.

Discussion

The data revealed two significant results; empowerment increased with chronological age and conjugal duration, but age at marriage and age difference from husband did not influence women's empowerment. Empowerment increased with age, however, it was only expressed in older women (41-49 years) compared to the youngest group (21-30 years) see Figure 1. Similarly, length of conjugal duration increased women empowerment in our data, but then again the only significant change was documented between lowest conjugal duration (2-6 years) and subsequent conjugal duration that spanned from 13-18 years. Even though the longest conjugal duration group (19-25 years) expressed highest empowerment from other groups, this empowerment did not reach any statistical significance from other groups, as suggested above we believe this was due to small sample size for this group ($n = 14$). Existing literature supports chronological age as a significant and positive determinant of women's empowerment (e.g., Acharya et al., 2010; Khan & Awan, 2011; Khan & Maan, 2008; Parveen & Leonhauser, 2005; Wiklander & Thede, 2010). Women's status may differ over the different phases of life span due to their changing roles (Jejeebhoy, 2000). Older women are expected to enjoy higher status,

rights and duties (Ethiopian Democratic and Health Survey, 2005) and financial empowerment (Nayak & Mahanta, 2009). Where a daughter-in-law takes on the responsibility of domestic work, a mother in law makes decisions of family affairs in Bangladesh (Haque et al., 2011). Higher level of empowerment with ensuing age might be caused by rich experiences as women are engaged in wiser decisions regarding economic matters (Batool, Ahmed & Qureshi, 2017; Khan & Awan, 2011; Sheikh et al., 2015).

Conjugal duration also appeared to have significant impact on women's empowerment (see Figure 2), which means women's empowerment increases with longer duration of marriage, possibly due to women's bargaining power within the homes. This part of our result is in line with the existing literature (e.g., Khan & Maan, 2008), according to them the underlying reason for this association may be due to adjustments women make with their husbands, and in-laws that enable them to deal with life problems. Reasons for why conjugal duration increases empowerment is echoed by Kabeer (1999) who suggests conjugal duration brings cognizance and thoughtfulness to women that supports them to nurture empathy with their husbands and improved matrimonial adjustment (e.g., Parveen & Leonhauser, 2005).

Age difference from husband did not appear to have significant impact on women's empowerment. Literature is scant on this issue, however, we find dissimilarity between our results and those attained in the previous studies, for example, Malhotra and Mather (1997) found mature chronological age of the husband as significant aspect of women to be empowered. Higher spousal age gap is common in Bangladesh. The women of age comparable to their husbands have been reported to be highly empowered and women older than their husbands were lesser empowered in economic decision making and household decision making (Haque et al., 2011).

The results also did not reveal significant difference in groups based on age at marriage. The existing literature shows that marriage at mature age may help a woman attain empowerment in her husband's house. For example Parveen and Leonhauser (2005) and Tareque et al. (2007) assert that generally marriage at early age can be a barrier in a woman's empowerment. Different researchers have suggested mature age at marriage as a strong determinant of women's empowerment, explaining that women married at early age (teen age) are not able to get to their say recognized in their in-laws. Hence suggest that women should not be married at early age (e.g., Haque et al., 2011; Rahman et al., 2009; Wiklander & Thede, 2010), which could be delayed with higher levels of schooling, delaying marriage, childbearing, and reducing fertility rates (UN, 2005, p. 110).

Conclusion and Recommendations

We generally infer from this data that age-related factors affect women's empowerment; chronological age, and conjugal duration were stronger factors that affected empowerment in Pakistani women, than age at marriage and age difference from husbands. Dividing the study sample into smaller samples for age groups, conjugal durations, ages at marriage, and age differences from husbands resulted in unequal sample sizes, where some of these groups had very few participants leading to non-significant comparisons among many different levels of the independent variables. This led to weakening of some study hypotheses, and disconfirming others. It is therefore recommended that future studies should gather bigger samples so as to get enough participants across different levels of independent variables to consistently support hypotheses.

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