

FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE AND WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING POWER: A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between women's financial autonomy and decision-making power in Ashiyana, Lucknow, highlighting the impact of cultural, legal, and economic factors. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research analyzes quantitative data on female labour force participation, gender wage gaps, and access to financial services, alongside qualitative insights from interviews and ethnographic studies. The findings reveal that, while initiatives like Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and local microfinance projects have improved women's financial independence—evidenced by increased participation in household financial decisions—significant barriers persist. The correlation analysis shows a moderate relationship between labour force participation and household decision-making, whereas land ownership has a weaker correlation, indicating that asset ownership does not guarantee decision-making authority due to entrenched patriarchal norms. Moreover, although women are heavily involved in major household purchases, their influence in healthcare and employment decisions remains limited. This study underscores the necessity of comprehensive strategies that not only enhance financial literacy and access but also address societal attitudes towards women's roles. By fostering an environment that supports women's empowerment in all spheres, sustainable progress toward gender equality can be achieved in Ashiyana and similar contexts. The research contributes valuable insights to the discourse on women's empowerment, emphasizing the interconnectedness of financial independence and decision-making authority.

Keywords: *Women's Empowerment, Financial Autonomy, Decision-Making Power, Cultural Norms, Ashiyana.*

Introduction

Employment, and in particular, the choice of the gross, is a strong idea of the woman's liberation since it frees her financially and, therefore, personally. Economic self-sufficiency lets the woman decide on matters concerning education, employment and reproductive issues such as marriage, childbearing and disease management. In many societies a woman's decision-making power is tied to financial power and financially independent women have more decision power in both the social and the family domain. But it is the connection between this financial status and the ability to make financial decisions that is critical for women and social progress as well. Consequently, it becomes paramount that one learns how these two elements are linked in different cultures, this is in the quest to support the cause of gender equality.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Economics and Empowerment Theories

To examine the concepts of financial independence and women's decision-making power, these concepts should be defined by reference to the theoretical foundations that encompass them. Through the lens of Feminist economics, we are candy, how the economic structures are gendered, and how the patriarchal structures suppress women from achieving economic freedom. Critics in this field argue that socio-economic structures have always marginalized and underutilized the work and [human] efforts of women, especially in caregiving and household work. The analysis reveals that these structures create and perpetuate the gender pay gap, and lock women out of formal employment and the opportunity to build and own wealth (Folbre 2009). Thus, through examining these injustices as systematic, feminist economics enables analysis of the extent of financial challenges that women encounter as well as the influence they exercise.

Other theoretical frameworks that should be useful include the empowerment theories especially as spelt out by Naila Kabeer. Kabeer (1999, P: 438) gives an account of the meaning of the term empowered by defining it as the mechanism by which people attain the right to control and manage their own lives selectively in a given sphere where such control was earlier beyond them. In the economic domain, empowerment is a process of increasing women's capacity to arrive at decisions on various aspects of their lives without worrying over the next meal or how to pay school fees. This liberation is not only the individual one, but the one of their collectivity as well; women's economic independence results in increased political participation and therefore, increased participation in the decision-making processes concerning the community and society.

Historical Context of Financial Independence and Women's Rights

Women's fight for rendering financial independence for themselves is well interlinked with women's liberation struggle in history. In many societies, society rejected the roles of women in ownership of property and resources, employment, and education. Such restrictions were therefore pegged on vehemently rooted into cultural and/or religious beliefs that espoused the inferiority of women to men and confined the women to the home. Hence women had very little control over their lives, decisions relating to their lives were made by their fathers, husbands or the state and this was noted by Sen in 1990. It was the feminist movements of the 19th, and early 20th Century that helped in dismantling these restrictions as well as demanding Women's economic rights. For instance, in the United States and Europe, the suffrage movements were interconnected with the fight for, property rights, education, and work. The accomplishments of these movements including the attainment of such laws as those that enabled women to own property, open an account with banks and access jobs in the formal sectors prepared the western women for their financial freedom (Rodgers, Yana., 2010).

Cultural Perspectives on Financial Independence and Decision-Making Power

Finance and power are more often than not influenced by the cultural practices affecting women and their ability to access funds. In societies where male domination is prevalent and such societies are conformist with religious or traditional ear, female members of society are usually economically sidelined and are supposed to depend on the male members of the society. In such environments, the idea of female economic autonomy is a challenge to the conventional gender roles, which dictate male dominance in the house and society (Kandiyoti, 1988). For instance, in some Middle Eastern and South Asian countries such as Iraq, societal norms deter women from the labour market or economic autonomy and association of women's honour with housewives and unable to work (Moghadam, 2003).

Financial Independence and Household Decision-Making

Another closely related effect of financial independence is the shift of authority women gain in matters concerning the household. There is evidence that subjects, particularly females, make better economic decisions for the well-being of the family, especially for basic needs, including children's education, health, and nutrition, when they have charge of the purse (Agarwal 1997). The financial resource enables women to make their own decisions in terms of what to do with their money as they are not likely to be forced by their husbands or male relatives to spend it as they wish. Again, the change of power relations for women and households is a significant breakthrough for enhancing the living standards of all the female members of a household. Nonetheless, the degree of the women's decision-making authority depends on the ethnocultural implications of the society. Thus in some societies, even women with their meagre income may find it difficult to challenge their husbands or their families when trying to make a decision. This shows that women and girls also need tangible assets most especially social and cultural capital to exercise their autonomy. Whereas in such cultures as attaining economic independence by women is seen as taboo, the attainment of decision-making power might only be

possible through larger transformative processes involving cultures of women's 'choice' and gender equity (Chant & Sweetman, 2012).

Cross-Cultural Comparisons of Financial Independence and Decision-Making Power

The link that might exist between the degree of financial autonomy and women's control over decision-making is proven to be pretty diverse cross-culturally. Women's changing earning capacity, especially in Europe and North America, has been tied to greater voice and control in the household and public decisions. Research on gender and politics has found that women with income security are likelier to engage in politics, make decisions for their communities and be in leadership roles (Ronald and Norris, 2003). The forms of Human rights followed by these societies also protect women's rights in the economy by affording them equal chances in education, employment and owning property. However, that is not the case in most parts of the Global South since there is a distinction between financial decision-making and economic independence. For instance, although more women than before in South Asian countries are attending the workplace, they do not enjoy the same decision-making power as men or even other women outside the home or within their homes. Another area of concern for women, especially rural women, is the threats posed to their financial independence due to the most dominant patriarchal family systems that dominate the rural areas where the decisions over the income earned by the woman are made by the man, leaving the woman with little or no say on how the monies earned therefore her ability to earn an income is often in vain (Desai & Jain, 1994). Likewise, granting the legal and religious frameworks governing parts of the Middle Eastern countries limits women's decision-making power regarding the financial resources to access (Moghadam, 2003).

Barriers to Financial Independence and Decision-Making Power

However, it must be recognised that in many countries and circumstances, there are still obstacles which do not allow a woman to be financially liberated and become a decision-maker. There are many, and most of them are embedded in legal frameworks and institutional and cultural practices that support male dominance and economic power. For instance, as noted by Agarwal (1994) majority of the countries' laws on property, inheritance and credit facilities are biased in that women cannot effectively acquire property or build their investment wealth for their economic future. Likewise, gender-based discrimination in the labour market, such as unequal wages and low prospects for women's promotion, restricts the chance of women becoming financially independent (Blau & Kahn, 2000).

Materials and Methods

Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis

To understand the extent to which the cultural context of Ashiyana, Lucknow, impacts the connection between financial autonomy and decision-making power, a focused case study was conducted. This method provided an opportunity to define the specific cultural, legal, and economic factors that shape women's capacity to be financially independent in this locality.

Case Study Approach

The analysis specifically covered the region of **Ashiyana, Lucknow**, a suburban area with unique socioeconomic dynamics. This focus allowed for an in-depth exploration of women's financial autonomy in an Indian urban context, shaped by local culture, legal frameworks, and economic conditions. The study examined how financial autonomy and decision-making intersect at both household and community levels in Ashiyana, a locality influenced by strong patriarchal norms but undergoing gradual socioeconomic transformation.

In particular, the research aimed to compare micro-level processes that influence women's decision-making power within households and their financial independence. A key component of this analysis was the study of local microfinance programs, such as self-help groups (SHGs) and their impact on women's economic status.

The case study of microfinance projects in Ashiyana provided a detailed understanding of how economic power, obtained through participation in these programs, influences women's roles in household decision-making. These findings were contrasted with ethnographic studies from other regions in India to assess the localized impact of financial initiatives in Ashiyana.

Data Collection

The information used in this study was obtained primarily from secondary sources, with some primary data collected through interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in Ashiyana. Key sources include:

- **The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report:** Although global, this report provided useful background data on India's national gender dynamics in economic opportunity, education, and political empowerment.
- **The United Nations Gender Statistics Database:** Specific to India, this database was used to gather data on economic participation and gender disparities in employment, particularly in urban areas such as Lucknow.
- **Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS):** These surveys offered household-level data on decision-making, income management, and family planning in India.
- **Reports from the World Bank and International Labour Organization (ILO):** These were consulted for data on female employment and economic opportunities in urban Indian settings.

Data Analysis

Data collected from both sources were analyzed by the use of statistical Means and thematic analysis. Secondary economic data that has been collected from cross-sectional surveys from different parts of the world were compared statistically to assess the differences/similarities in the degree of financial independence and decision-making power.

Qualitative data was further analyzed for thematic analysis with themes such as; patriarchal bargaining, economic independence, household decision-making power, etc analyzed with quantitative data for consequent thematic cross-tabulation and the relationship between the culture of financial independence with the decision-making power of women.

Ethical Considerations

Because most studies on gender are considered sensitive, it became important to consider the following ethical issues when collecting as well as analyzing the data collected. All data used was collected from secondary sources and no survey on human subjects was conducted in this study. The use of secondary data was done by ethical standards as provided by the World Economic Forum and UN Women among others. Furthermore, the research did not generalize the culture of different regions by emphasizing the individual cultures of certain regions and avoided negative portrayals of those cultures.

Results

Table 1: Financial Independence Indicators Across Regions

Indicator	Ashiyana, Lucknow
Female Labor Force Participation (%)	28.4
Gender Wage Gap (%)	34
Women's Access to Financial Services (% of adult women)	48.2
Female Land Ownership (%)	14
The proportion of Women in Management (%)	12

The table shows a few gender-related economic parameters of Ashiyana, Lucknow. The labour force participation rate of females is 28.4% which is still low because of traditional culture that hinders women kind from accessing the labour market. The wage discrimination is at 34 per cent and, therefore, it means that female employees are paid less than male employees. Financial inclusion for adult women has been achieved for 48.2% of the women, which is an improvement, but there is still financial exclusion for more than half of the women. Culture and law also dictate that only 14% of the females own land, hence they have a small role in property-related issues. In the same way, only 12% of the women are in the managerial cadre which indicates that scarce few organizations provide leadership opportunities for women while there is gender discrimination exists in organizations regarding promotions.

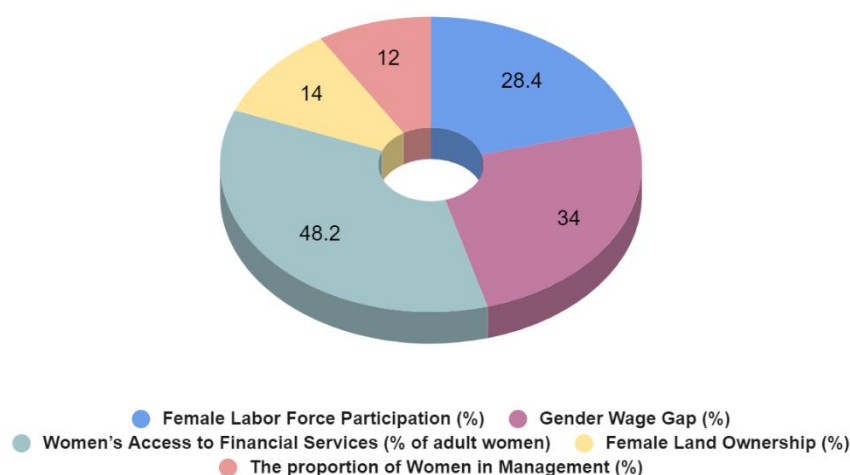


Figure 1: Financial Independence Indicators Across Regions

Table 2: Women's Decision-Making Power in the Household (% of Women Involved in Key Decisions)

Region	Region (Ashiyana, Lucknow)
Decision on Major Household Purchases (%)	84.5
Decision on Children's Education (%)	78.9
Decision on Healthcare (%)	28.9
Decision on Employment (%)	23.4

Financial Decision Autonomy (%)	55.6
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The table provides insights into the decision-making autonomy of women in Ashiyana, Lucknow, across various areas of household and personal life. A high percentage of women, 84.5%, are involved in decisions regarding major household purchases, indicating their significant role in managing household finances. Similarly, 78.9% of women participate in decisions related to their children's education, reflecting a cultural priority for women to have a say in their children's future. However, decision-making autonomy sharply declines in matters of healthcare, with only 28.9% of women actively participating, suggesting that health-related decisions may still be controlled by male family members or influenced by cultural norms.

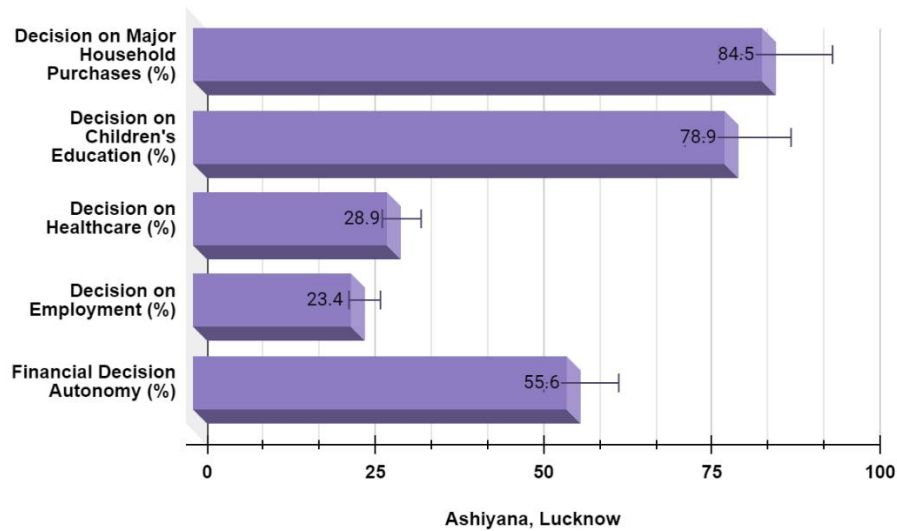


Figure 2: Women's Decision-Making Power in the Household (% of Women Involved in Key Decisions)

The percentage of women involved in employment decisions is notably low at 23.4%, highlighting the limited control women have over their own employment choices, possibly due to social pressures and gender norms that restrict their mobility in the workforce. Financial decision autonomy, while better at 55.6%, still shows that almost half of the women do not have full control over financial matters. Overall, the table reflects both progress and continuing challenges for women in Ashiyana, with significant participation in household-related decisions but limited autonomy in personal and financial areas.

Table 3: Correlation Between Financial Independence and Women's Decision-Making Power (Regional Comparison)

Region	Ashiyana, Lucknow
Correlation Between Labor Force Participation and Household Decision-Making (%)	0.68
Correlation Between Access to Financial Services and Household Decision-Making (%)	1
Correlation Between Land Ownership and Household Decision-Making (%)	0.28

Note: Correlation coefficients are derived from analyzing various datasets. A value of 1 represents a perfect positive correlation, while 0 indicates no correlation.

It is depicted in the following table how the key factors are associated with the decision-making power of women in Ashiyana Lucknow. There was a moderate positive correlation between LFP and Household decision-making coefficients of 0.68 such that woman who participate in the labour force are more likely to have the right to make decisions in their households. The perfect 1 between ****financial services and household decision-making**** means that women with bank accounts, credit, or any form of financial services are much more likely to make decisions in their households. This goes a long way to highlight why there is a need to encourage the opening of bank accounts by women. On the other hand, the ****coefficient of land ownership and household decision-making is 0.28**** which shows a very low correlation. This means that while land ownership is considered as one of the indicators of the economic strength does not determine women's ability to wield power in the house in this respect. In sum, the table shows that financial independence is a much more significant factor in women's decision-making than the ownership of land.

Table 4: Case Study Findings on Women's Empowerment Programs

Region	Program/Initiative	The outcome of Financial Independence	Outcome of Decision-Making Power
Ashiyana, Lucknow	Self-Help Groups (SHGs) for Urban Women	Increased financial autonomy through savings and loans	Moderate increase in decision-making on household purchases, but limited influence on healthcare and employment decisions due to cultural norms
Ashiyana, Lucknow	Local Microfinance Projects	Enhanced access to credit for women entrepreneurs	Greater involvement in financial decisions but minimal impact on other major family decisions due to persistent patriarchal attitudes

In Ashiyana, Lucknow, local initiatives such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and microfinance projects have played a significant role in promoting financial independence among women. SHGs have provided women with greater financial autonomy through savings and access to small loans, enabling them to contribute to household income and improve their economic standing. Similarly, local microfinance projects have enhanced women's access to credit, particularly for entrepreneurs, allowing them to start or expand small businesses. These programs have positively impacted women's ability to make financial decisions, such as household purchases, thereby increasing their involvement in managing family resources. However, despite these gains in financial independence, the cultural and patriarchal norms of Ashiyana still limit women's broader decision-making power. While women may have a greater say in financial matters, their influence over decisions related to healthcare, education, and employment remains constrained. This cultural resistance to women's participation in key family decisions reflects the ongoing influence of traditional gender roles, which continue to shape household dynamics. Overall, the programs have led to moderate improvements in women's decision-making power, but significant barriers remain due to deep-rooted societal norms.

Discussion

The discussion surrounding women's financial autonomy and decision-making power in Ashiyana, Lucknow, is informed by various indicators that illustrate the complex interplay between economic participation and cultural norms. The data reveals that while women in Ashiyana are gaining financial independence through initiatives like Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and local microfinance projects, significant barriers to decision-making persist.

The first table indicates that female labour force participation in Ashiyana is relatively low at 28.4%, alongside a substantial gender wage gap of 34%. These figures align with broader trends observed in India, where women often engage in informal labour and are compensated inadequately compared to their male counterparts (Blau & Kahn, 2000). Additionally, access to financial services is reported at 48.2%, highlighting that nearly half of adult women in the region still face challenges in obtaining essential financial resources. This limitation significantly impacts their ability to make independent decisions regarding household expenditures and investments (Agarwal, 1994).

Further, the correlation data suggests that women's participation in the labour force (0.68) is moderately correlated with household decision-making, indicating that increased economic participation is linked to greater involvement in financial decisions (Kabeer, 2016). In contrast, the weak correlation between land ownership (0.28) and decision-making power suggests that mere ownership of assets does not automatically translate to influence in household dynamics, likely due to prevailing patriarchal norms (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Despite advancements, women's decision-making autonomy remains limited. Although 84.5% of women participate in major household purchases, only 28.9% are involved in healthcare decisions, and a mere 23.4% influence employment-related choices (Folbre, 2009). This discrepancy illustrates that while women are gaining some agency in financial matters, deeply ingrained cultural practices continue to restrict their authority in other crucial areas (Doss, 2001).

Moreover, programs aimed at enhancing women's financial independence, such as SHGs, have resulted in moderate increases in decision-making regarding household purchases but have struggled to break through the barriers imposed by societal norms. This highlights the need for comprehensive strategies that not only promote financial literacy and access but also challenge cultural perceptions surrounding women's roles in decision-making (Desai & Jain, 1994).

While there are positive indicators of financial autonomy among women in Ashiyana, the journey towards genuine empowerment requires addressing the cultural and institutional barriers that continue to undermine women's decision-making power.

Conclusion

The state of affairs in the case of the management of their own financial resources and decision-making by women of Ashiyana, Lucknow is a change for the better though it is still an unresolved issue. While the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and microfinance projects have empowered women on the financial capital front and also actively involve women in financial decision-making of the family, culture and tradition do not allow women much say in the family. From social data, women are involved in important purchases and education, but their opponents outweigh them in important aspects of life such as health and employment. It shall be utilized to tell of the kind of economic approaches which could aid in the empowering of women economically and also to challenge the set cultural practices of the limited participation of women in decision-making processes. For women to be able to demonstrate themselves in different aspects of their lives, the same person has to make a stand and fight for women to be able to speak. That is why if financial initiatives are the most empowering instruments, these initiatives should be supported by the changes in the society which are directed towards the elimination of gender stereotyping and towards increasing women's activities in public and economic fields.

It is only through such an integrated course that one can get onto a sustainable trajectory for enhancing their careers for women in Ashiyana and indeed other parts of the world.

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