

Women's Autonomy and Reproductive Behavior in Two Urban Areas of Nepal

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Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to improving women's status and enhancing their roles in the process of socioeconomic development. Various dimensions related to these issues are being explored. One prominent school of thought has investigated the linkage between women's status and their reproductive behavior and holds that as inequalities between the sexes diminish, the emerging processes set off behavioral changes that culminate in a decline in fertility (Mason, 1986; Jejeebhoy, 1988 and 1995). The present study builds upon this assumption and further explores the mechanisms of autonomy that result in fertility differentials between subgroups of women.

Following Dyson and Moore (1983), we use the term 'autonomy' rather than 'status' to avoid confusion between 'status' and 'esteem' which may or may not be related to women's autonomy. In this regard, the referent is women's autonomy in relation to other women and to men. Dyson and Moore (1983: 45) define autonomy as "the capacity to manipulate one's personal environment" and "the ability—technical, social, and psychological—to obtain information and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one's private concerns and those of one's intimates."

Several socioeconomic factors may affect women's autonomy. Jejeebhoy (1988) reviewing Indian literature on women's position and interrelations with fertility and mortality, identified three critical components of women's autonomy: (1) control over material and social resources; (2) knowledge, opportunities and alternatives available to women; and (3) women's position within the home. In other words, women's position can be understood in terms of decision-making, freedom of movement and domestic autonomy.

Nepal is known as a land of diversity (Bista, 1972). Its population is comprised of different castes, ethnic and tribal groups and has been affected by a series of historical migratory processes from both sides of its border. From the southern Indian plains, it inherited Hindu and Muslim groups while from the north (Tibet/China) it inherited Buddhists. These groups often lived in harmony with the indigenous tribal populations and a process of assimilation and acculturation developed; this is the foundation of Nepali society and culture.

Because of its varied heritage, there are wide variations in women's status across the caste and ethnic groups in Nepal. The landmark study in the regard is *The Status of Women in Nepal* (Acharya and Bennett, 1981). This report documented that women's status varies across caste-ethnic lines—in some groups women have relatively higher positions in society. In general, this research found higher women's autonomy among the hill tribal populations and lower autonomy among the Hindu caste groups.

A study by Morgan and Niraula (1995) found that the hill and the Terai (lowland plains in the South) villages in rural Nepal vary dramatically in the degree of women's autonomy. Freedom of movement and wives' household decision-making power are markedly higher in the hill than in the Terai setting. Some of the implications of the lower autonomy of Terai women were higher demand for children, and a lower level of contraceptive use. Further, Niraula and Morgan (1994) found that village differences in household structure, wives' education and wives' work status in different settings did not account for the differences in women's autonomy. Subsequent research revealed that sharp differences in autonomy in the different settings exist in community institutional structures (Morgan and Niraula, 1995; Niraula and Morgan, 1996). The researchers (Morgan and Niraula, 1995; Niraula and Morgan,

1996) concluded that women in the hills were more autonomous than their counterparts in the Terai because the "cultural context" provided flexibility and options that the Terai women did not have. Cultural constructs as revealed in the nature of patriarchy and the caste-system were found to be very rigid in the rural Terai; this contributed to women's lower status and autonomy. Little is known about women's autonomy and gender roles in urban Nepal.

In this paper, we focus on urban Nepal. The main research question we pursue is whether the differences in women's autonomy between the rural hill and Terai settings prevail in urban Nepal, independent of the potential effects of caste-ethnicity. We also examine the interrelationship between autonomy and reproductive behavior.

Methodology and the Settings

We purposively selected two urban settings—one each in the hill and Terai regions. We selected areas that were as alike as possible, differing only with respect to a single 'test' variable (Smith, 1989). This strategy follows from our strategy to maximize variability on women's status in order to provide a strong test of the effect of women's status on fertility (Morgan and Niraula, 1995; Niraula and Morgan, 1994 and 1996). We selected Brahmins, Chhetris and Newars (for a description of these ethnic groups, see Bista, 1972), the three dominant caste groups from both urban areas. According to the 1991 census, these three caste groups account for more than one-third of Nepal's population.

We used a modified version of the survey tools previously used by Niraula and Morgan (1994). These included three sets of structured survey questionnaires: household, eligible woman, and husband questionnaires. The individual level data collection was supplemented by a community questionnaire. Finally, some case studies were documented.

The survey was conducted from February to April 1997. Prior to the fieldwork, field staff, both male and female interviewers, underwent training. Male interviewers were responsible for the household and husband questionnaires; female interviewers were responsible for the woman (eligible respondent) questionnaires. Most of the interviewers were graduates with previous experience in conducting surveys.

The voters' lists from the respective municipalities were used for drawing samples. Households belonging to the three caste groups were marked and listed. Based on the number of households in each category of caste and the required number of households, a random number was selected for the starting point and an equal number of households from each caste group was selected. This yielded 304 and 280 ever-married women aged 15-49 in Biratnagar (Terai) and Ilam (hill), respectively. The survey was conducted in the two sites simultaneously. The study populations and their major characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Ilam and Biratnagar represent the hills and the Terai, respectively. Both are the headquarters of the respective districts and both the urban settings have special significance for Nepal's administrative and industrial development. Ilam is famous for its beautiful landscape that includes Nepal's premier tea industry. Ilam borders with the Indian district of Darjeeling, a hill resort area which is famous for tea plantations, tourism and high quality boarding schools. Ilam municipality is an area of historical importance in modern Nepal's struggle for democratic freedom. Because of its close proximity to the schools in the east (India) and access to both the hill and Terai districts, Ilam has become the hub of many economic, social and cultural activities.

Biratnagar is Nepal's second largest city and its pioneer industrial district. It has Nepal's earliest industrial establishments and is home to many of the politicians who led the 1951 revolution and were in the limelight thereafter. As is the case with most of the Terai settlements, Biratnagar's population is dominated by migrants from both directions—the hill people from the North and the people of Indian origin from the South.

Both Ilam and Biratnagar became part of the Nepal kingdom after the conquest of the petty states by the Gorkhali army. Until then, both the areas are believed to have been ruled by a *Kirati*, representing an Eastern hill ethnic/tribal group. Until the 1950s, Biratnagar, was surrounded by dense forest and infected by malaria. Because of this, it was considered a place to send criminals. The importance of the forest as a source of timber and revenue increased in the national economy, and immigrants from the north and south were encouraged to come and resettle by clearing the forests. Over time, because of its location and easy access to India, Biratnagar witnessed the establishment of many pioneer industries, such as jute,

Table 1 Selected socioeconomic characteristics and populations of the study areas, Morang and Ilam, 1997

Characteristics	Morang (Terai)	Ilam (Hill)
Major occupation		
Service	20.6	12.3
Business/trade	6.3	9.7
Agriculture	2.2	6.6
Average household annual income (Rs.)	69,299	65,752
Development infrastructure		
Access to all weather road	Yes	Yes
Existence of a large number of govt. and non-government agencies/offices, school, college, hospitals	Yes	Yes
Percent of households with radio	93.0	84.6
Percent of households with TV	89.3	44.9
Percent of households with telephone	37.3	19.9
Percent of households with modern toilet facility	93.1	62.1
Percent of households using gas, electricity or kerosene as cooking fuel	77.6	51.1
Schooling of children		
Percent of school-going population to the total (5-19)	91.9	83.1
Percent of girls (5-19) not in school	4.3	9.2
Percent of boys (5-19) not in school	3.8	7.7
Study population		
Total population	1517	1531
Percent male	49.4	51.0
Percent female	50.6	49.0
Percent of population (0-14 yrs)	30.7	38.6
Percent of population (6 years and above) illiterate	8.7	12.5
Female	13.8	19.7
Male	3.8	5.0
Mean years of schooling of women respondents (among those who have attended school)	8.9	9.3
Number of households	304	280
Ethnicity		
Brahmin	100	87
Chhetri	105	97
Newar	99	104
Average size of household	5.0	5.7
Number of women (15-49) interviewed	304	288
Number of husbands interviewed	179	181

sugarcane, match and textiles. Furthermore, the labor movement in these industries is believed to have contributed significantly to the ousting of the Rana regime in 1951.

Ilam and Biratnagar are thus Nepal's foremost urban centers and have been the hub of many socioeconomic and political changes. Nevertheless, the areas do differ. While Ilam has been rejuvenated by commercialization of tea, dairy products and crop diversification, Biratnagar is attempting to overcome years of stagnation and recession and to regain its importance in the country's economy.

Results

Since the central issue examined in this paper is whether significant differences exist between women's autonomy and fertility behavior in the study populations, we begin the analysis by examining gender roles in the settings. Variability in gender experience is fundamentally different from that based on caste, class and ethnicity. Because of their family and kin relationships with men, women are generally distributed across these other social hierarchies (Niraula and Morgan, 1994).

Table 2 shows women's responses to questions regarding who does various household activities/tasks. The responses have been ordered from tasks most often done by women to those most often done

Table 2 Gender roles in various activities (percent saying 'yes' to the question who does the specified work most), Morang and Ilam, 1997

Activities	Morang (Terai)		Ilam (Hill)		Odds Ratio (Terai/Hill)
	Odds F/M	Rank	Odds F/M	Rank	
Washing clothes	52.2	1	54.4	2	0.96
Washing dishes	45.6	2	48.8	3	0.93
Food preparation	40.9	3	70.5	1	0.58
Child care	24.1	4	37.5	4	0.64
Cleaning the house	21.2	5	33.1	5	0.64
Fetching water	9.2	6	18.7	6	0.49
Foodgrain purchase	2.9	7	0.3	9	2.78***
Keeping of money	2.8	8	0.1	13	4.06***
Buying clothes	2.4	9	0.3	10	2.45***
Processing food	2.1	10	1.5	8	1.44
Animal care	1.2	11	1.6	7	0.73
Fetching fuel-wood	0.6	12	0.2	12	3.40**
Supervise agricultural work	0.2	13	0.3	11	0.72
Earnings	0.2	14	0.1	14	1.74*

Significant at * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.005$, *** $p < 0.001$. F/M = Female/Male.

by men. The data clearly show that most of the tasks are gender-specific in both settings. The odds ratio in column 3 measures the difference between settings in the extent to which tasks are feminine (or masculine). The gender stereotypes hold for most of the tasks performed at the household level. The dichotomy of 'inside' tasks for women and 'outside' tasks for men is clearly evident. The first seven tasks are overwhelmingly performed by women in both settings. For these tasks, the odds in column 3 are less than 1.0, indicating the tasks are less feminine in the hills than in the plains. However, none of these differences are statistically significant. The traditional roles assigned to women are still practiced in both settings. Women bear primary responsibilities for washing clothes, washing dishes, preparing food, child care, cleaning the house and fetching water.

Some of the tasks that have important implications for women's autonomy are, however, significantly different across the settings. For example, purchase of foodgrains and clothes and keeping of money differ; these differences are statistically significant. Since both the settings are urban, fuel-wood is not gathered or collected from the forest; it is available in the local market and thus, men are involved in the purchase of the fuel. This activity is more masculine in the Terai setting than in the hill setting.

Table 3 shows how gender roles in performing various activities are translated into household decision-making roles. As in the previous table, decisions are ranked from those mostly made by women to those mostly made by men. Columns 3 and 6 show the relative rank of the decisions in the two settings. The first five categories of decisions are mostly made by women and score almost the same in both settings; there are no significant setting differences. However, from decision categories six and beyond, most of the decisions are made by men; and significant setting differences appear.

The Terai urban setting seems to have a relatively better gender balance with regard to household decisions on children's treatment and their schooling, and the purchase of major goods such as jewelry and television than the hill urban setting.

The data presented in Tables 2 and 3 are consistent with two main findings previously reported by Niraula and Morgan (1994). First, almost all tasks and decisions are gender-based—performed disproportionately by either men or women. Second, rank ordering of tasks from feminine to masculine is similar across settings. Contrary to the findings from the two rural settings analyzed by Niraula and

Table 3 Wives' responses to questions on who makes most decisions, Morang and Ilam, 1997

Who Decides	Morang (Terai)		Ilam (Hill)		Odds Ratio (Morang/Ilam)
	F/M	Rank	F/M	Rank	
What food to cook	9.17	1	8.57	1	1.07
Son's misbehavior	1.31	2	1.21	3	1.08
Daughter's misbehavior	1.24	3	1.30	2	0.95
Whether to have next child	1.10	4	1.00	4	1.10
How many children to have	1.03	5	0.82	5	1.21
Medical treatment for daughters	0.84	6	0.28	8	2.98***
Medical treatment for sons	0.73	7	0.30	6	2.45***
Daughter's education	0.58	8	0.14	12	4.11***
Son's education	0.50	9	0.17	11	2.86***
Purchase of jewelry	0.46	10	0.28	9	1.63***
You working outside	0.38	11	0.18	10	2.15***
Type of schooling	0.27	12	0.10	13	1.94**
Purchase of tv etc.	0.21	13	0.08	15	2.59***
Children's marriage	0.18	14	0.29	7	0.61*
Institutional loan	0.14	15	0.10	14	1.36
Non-institutional loan	0.13	16	0.08	16	1.73
Land transactions	0.12	17	0.08	17	1.46

Significant at * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.005$; *** $p > 0.001$.
F = Female; M = Male.

Morgan (1994), however, the hill urban setting in this study shows a sharper gender division of labor than the Terai setting.

Gender differentials in tasks performed and decisions made lead to differential power. These power differentials are, in turn, reflected in the relative freedom of mobility. In both settings, men were seen everywhere—in markets, offices, and traveling—whereas women's presence was negligible. Yet given the greater differentiation of tasks and decisions in the hill settings, we expect that women's freedom of movement would be lower in the hills than in the Terai. Table 4 presents data relating to these aspects.

Two types of data were collected regarding women's freedom of movement. The first type reflects societal values and norms, and was worded—"is it acceptable for you to go to certain places alone." The second type of information relates to whether the woman goes to these places alone. The questions yielded similar responses. We have used the latter type of information in generating Table 4, i.e., whether the women go certain places alone. In both settings, women's freedom of movement is high. Women tend to go alone to the local market, the

Table 4 Women's response to questions on whether they go alone to specific places (percent saying 'yes'), Morang and Ilam, 1997

Places	Morang (Terai)	Ilam (Hill)	Odds Ratio (Morang/Ilam)
1. Local market	98.4	95.5	3.26*
2. Health post	98.7	94.8	4.76**
3. Field/outside	90.5	77.4	2.99***
4. Public places	95.1	81.0	6.12***
5. Friends/relatives	96.2	93.8	2.9*
6. Temples/fair	96.1	88.9	2.74**
7. Other village	82.2	37.8	7.45***
8. Cinema	75.0	17.4	17.04***
9. Local bank	91.4	62.8	4.36***
10. Local clubs	58.6	22.9	6.41***

Significant at * $p < .05$; ** $p < .005$; *** $p < 0.001$.

health post/hospital, and to visit friends and relatives. Going to the cinema hall, the bank and the local clubs is more restricted. These restrictions are greater in the hills than in the Terai and the differences are statistically significant. Differences in topography of the settings may partially explain observed differences in freedom of movement indicators.

Women's access to and control over resources are important for their autonomy. In Nepal, men are projected as the sole 'bread-earner' of the household. Given this, the extent to which women have access to and control over important resources, the extent to which they depend on men for support for themselves and their children/dependents and the degree to which women attest to these attitudes can be considered measures of women's economic autonomy. We present women's response to these questions in Table 5.

The data show that women contribute to important household decisions (i.e., how the household income is spent) in both urban settings. Women in the hills reported having a greater say in this decision than women in the Terai, but the difference is not statistically significant. In both settings, almost one-third of women have ownership of landed property, a major source of income, wealth and socioeconomic status. However, ownership of personal property and valuables are much higher for women in the Terai. Having personal property enables women to exercise and manipulate situations to their advantage. More women in the Terai said they would be able to support themselves and their dependents without their husbands, and the difference between the settings is statistically

Table 5 Women's responses to household income, ownership of resources and attitude towards self-support (percent saying 'yes'), Morang and Ilam, 1997

Items	Morang (Terai)	Ilam (Hill)	Odds Ratio (Morang/Ilam)
1. Have a say in how household income is spent	78.9	80.6	0.89
2. Ownership of landed property	32.9	28.5	1.23
3. Ownership of other personal valuable property	57.0	26.0	5.5***
4. Able to support self and dependents without husband	44.7	36.1	1.43*
5. Free to buy a sari worth Rs. 300	68.8	70.5	0.92
6. Free to buy jewelry worth Rs. 1000	53.9	30.2	3.58***

Significant at * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

significant. In both settings, almost 70 percent of the women can autonomously buy a sari worth Rs. 300. However, as one moves to a more valued item such as jewelry worth Rs. 1000, women in the Terai are much more likely to autonomously buy jewelry of their choice.

For further analysis we have developed autonomy scales from these measures—one which measures women's economic autonomy and the other their freedom of movement. For the economic indicator, we selected items 1, 4, 5 and 6 from Table 5; and for the freedom of movement indicator, we selected items 1, 3, 7 and 9 from Table 4. These scales range from 0-4 in which the lower value represents lower autonomy and the higher value indicates higher autonomy. A score of 0 indicates that women have no autonomy whereas a score of 4 indicates that women enjoy autonomy in all four indicators included in the scale. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6 shows that more than three-fourths of women have a freedom to movement score of 3 or more indicating that women enjoy relative freedom of mobility in both settings. However, in the case of economic autonomy, three-fifths of women are in the 0-2 range indicating that women have relatively less economic autonomy as compared to their freedom of movement.

The significant setting differences seen in Tables 4 and 5 are transferred to these scales. More than 70 percent of women in the Terai setting have a freedom of movement score of 4; the corresponding figure for the hill setting is less than half this number. There are also significant setting differences in economic autonomy

Table 6 Freedom of movement and economic autonomy scales, Morang and Ilam, 1997

Autonomy Scales	Morang (Terai)		Ilam (Hill)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Freedom of movement						
0 (low autonomy)	5	1.6	4	1.4	9	1.5
1	15	4.9	20	6.9	35	5.9
2	34	11.2	62	21.5	96	16.2
3	24	7.9	12	38.9	136	23.0
4 (high autonomy)	226	74.3	90	31.5	316	53.4
X ² (DF)						124.1*** (4)
Economic autonomy						
0 (low autonomy)	6	2.0	18	6.3	24	4.1
1	49	16.1	42	14.6	91	15.4
2	103	33.9	136	47.2	239	40.4
3	90	29.6	72	25.0	162	27.4
4 (high autonomy)	56	18.4	20	6.9	76	12.8
X ² (DF)						29.7*** (4)

Significant at ***p<0.0001.

between the two settings. Terai women have more economic autonomy than hill women.

As stated earlier, one of the objectives of this paper is to examine how the autonomy factor influences reproductive behavior. Because the number of cases is too small to calculate age-specific or total fertility rates across settings, current use of contraception among women who want no more children is used as an indicator for reproductive intentions. Bivariate analysis of autonomy and unmet need (not shown here) revealed that the hill setting has lower unmet need than the Terai setting. This was unexpected given the fact that women in the hills ranked lower on the autonomy scales than their counterparts in the Terai. To disentangle the effects of various socioeconomic variables on the dependent variable, i.e., unmet need among women, we use logistic regression. Means and standard deviations of the dependent and independent variables included in the multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 7.

Table 8 shows that the effect of the independent variables on unmet need does not vary substantially between the partial and full models; i.e., the direction of all effects is constant. Therefore, we will concentrate on interpreting the full model effects.

Table 7 Mean and standard deviation (S.D.) of socioeconomic variables, Morang and Ilam, 1997

Variables	Mean	S.D.
Age (age minus median age)	0.89	7.25
Education	7.05	4.28
Proportion of respondents as wife of household head	0.86	0.35
Number of living sons	1.12	1.85
Number of living daughters	1.16	1.06
At least two living sons	0.31	0.46
At least one living daughter	0.70	0.46
Possession of high valued goods (radio, tv, viewing, telephone)	2.84	1.42
Proportion of Chhetri	0.34	0.48
Proportion of Newar	0.34	0.48
Freedom of movement	3.20	1.01
Proportion of hill respondents	0.49	0.50
Proportion with low income	0.34	0.47
Economic autonomy	2.30	1.00
Proportion with unmet need for contraception	0.31	0.46
Proportion of love marriages	0.267	0.44

Women living in the hill setting are less likely to have an unmet need for contraception. Living in the hills decreases the likelihood of having unmet need by 55 percent. We suggest one reason for this effect of living in the hills (which would be unexpected given the similarity of the two settings) is its close proximity to Darjeeling, a district in India which has a long history of family planning programs and innovative programs for social reforms.

As far as autonomy variables are concerned, economic autonomy stands out in its effect on unmet need. Specifically, for each point increase in economic autonomy women are less likely to have an unmet need by a factor of 62 percent. Each increase in freedom of movement reduces unmet need by a factor of 49 percent; this effect is significant at the 10 percent level. However, given the small sample size and the strength of the effect, we consider this to be significant.

Finally, only two background variables exert a significant effect on unmet need. Having additional daughters increases the odds of having unmet need. This variable, however, must be interpreted cautiously. This may be reflecting ideal family composition preference—that of two sons and one daughter (Niraula and Morgan, 1996a). Being a wife of the household head increases the likelihood of having an unmet need.

Table 8 Logistic regression coefficients of the effects of socioeconomic and demographic characteristics on unmet need for contraception, Morang and Ilam, 1997

Variables	Model I		Model II	
	B	S.E	B	S.E
Demographic				
Age minus median age (31)	-0.022	0.024	-0.014	0.025
Age squared	-0.002	0.003	-0.003	0.003
Age at marriage	0.041	0.051	0.05	0.053
Number of living sons	0.304	0.215	0.279	0.220
Number of living daughters	-0.453+	0.142	0.338*	0.146
Social				
Respondent's education	-0.031	0.044	-0.003	0.045
Husband's education	-0.169	0.425	-0.906	0.934
Relation to household head	0.673	0.478	0.803+	0.487
Chhetri	-0.278	0.401	-0.214	0.424
Newar	-0.044	0.401	-0.025	0.424
Love marriage	0.127	0.344	0.295	0.360
Economic				
Possession of household valuables	0.014	0.138	0.063	0.141
Income	0.182	0.214	0.212	0.222
Hill district	-0.453	0.318	-0.798*	0.351
Autonomy				
Freedom of movement			-0.672+	0.383
Economic autonomy			-0.962**	0.388
-2 Log likelihood	259.01		245.77	

Significant at +p< 0.10; *p< 0.05; **p< 0.01.

Discussion and Conclusion

We included several socioeconomic variables that are thought to be important indicators of female autonomy and are likely to influence women's reproductive intentions in this analysis. Empirical results have suggested that age is an important indicator of women's autonomy (Basu, 1996). Other literature has established the negative effects of education, beyond the primary level, on fertility. Results do not support these relationships. In both urban areas we studied, educational levels are high among the general population. This has reduced the relative importance of female education and is supportive of the view that mass education is an important contributor to the onset of fertility decline and changes in reproductive behavior (Caldwell, 1980; Caldwell, B., 1996). Given the patriarchal structure we also considered family composition. As previously stated having a

daughter in the family increases the odds of having an unmet need. The results did not show any significant differences in fertility intentions among castes.

There may be several pathways through which autonomy can impact fertility behavior. General expectations are that higher levels of autonomy reduce fertility, with intermediate variables operating at several levels. In rural Nepal, Niraula and Morgan (1994 and 1996) found that exposure to the outside world through education had a significant impact on autonomy and fertility. But, in this analysis of two urban settings many variables that are likely to affect fertility behavior have been held constant. In both settings, more than 40 percent of women have schooling beyond the high school level. The average household income does not vary much between settings. Age at marriage is slightly higher in the hill setting. Both areas have access to modern facilities and infrastructures: schools, colleges, hospitals, electricity, televisions and telephones. The number of children ever born and number surviving are almost identical in both settings. And although there are some significant differences in gender performed tasks between the settings, scores for women's autonomy are relatively high for both settings.

Our analysis found that women's economic autonomy influences use of contraception; women with greater economic autonomy are less likely to have an unmet need for contraception. Freedom of movement is another autonomy measure that influences fertility behavior but its effect is considerably less than that of economic autonomy. However, neither background nor women's autonomy variables mediate the effect of residing in a hill district. That is, the effect of place of residence (hill or Terai) remains strong and independent of all other factors. These results are consistent with previous studies which showed that those living in the hills are less likely to have an unmet need for contraception than those in the Terai.

Both study communities—Biratnagar and Ilam—are “modern” settings, each having access to roads, family planning services, industries and other services. We surmise that there may be some threshold level of “modernization” above which further improvements in women's autonomy may not lead to a decrease in unmet need, given the existence of certain cultural constraints and preferences. The apparent lack of the effect of women's autonomy on increased use of contraception should not, however, undermine the overall efforts aimed at improving women's autonomy that could ultimately lead to a just, equitable and gender-balanced society.

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