

**Power and Priorities:
Gender, Caste, and Household Bargaining in India**

Nancy Luke
Associate Professor
Department of Sociology and Population Studies and Training Center
Brown University
Nancy_Luke@brown.edu

Abstract

Three separate literatures employ bargaining power theory to examine resource allocation within the household, domestic violence, and housework. Despite this common framework, these literatures remain distinct in their theoretical and empirical applications, with few comparative studies across social groups. I examine women's bargaining power across multiple household domains in India, where women have increasing access to wage labor and the caste system continues to stratify society. Using survey data from female tea plantation workers, I find that lower caste women use their earnings to prioritize child education and savings at a cost to their own well-being in terms of marital violence and less participation by husbands in housework. In contrast, higher caste women's earnings have little effect in any domain, suggesting that they support male authority. These findings provide a more complete picture of household dynamics and underscore the potential for women's earnings to narrow persistent caste inequalities in India.

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Extended abstract

A dramatic rise in women's labor force participation has occurred in the last half-century, and scholars have been interested in how women's entry into the public sphere impacts gender relations in the household. Three separate literatures have employed bargaining power, or relative resources, theory to gain leverage on this question, including research on resource allocation within the household, intimate partner violence, and the domestic division of labor. Despite this common bargaining framework, these three bodies of research remain distinct in their theoretical and empirical applications. A further limitation is that much of the research treats women's experiences as homogeneous; there are few comparative studies of women's bargaining power across social groups, such as race, ethnicity, or class.

India is a particularly interesting site to examine women's bargaining power across these household domains, given women's increasing access to wage labor during the contemporary

period of globalization and liberalization. Furthermore, the Indian caste system continues to stratify society, with the lowest castes experiencing the lowest development indicators. This study uses data collected from female tea plantation workers in South India to examine the effects of women's earnings across multiple household domains and how these processes differ across caste groups. Survey data from 3300 female workers was matched with income data for themselves and their husbands collected from computerized tea company records. I estimate all descriptive statistics and regression analyses by two groups: the lowest caste group, comprising former slave castes of Tamil Nadu, and the higher non-slave caste group, including other untouchable as well as forward castes. This distinction is made to separate the lowest former slave castes, who were historically the most disadvantaged and discriminated against, from all other castes.

In the tea estates, economic opportunities are equal across all castes, with women primarily engaged as tea leaf pluckers and men working in supporting tasks, including weeding and pruning and in the tea estate factories. The descriptive statistics in Table 1 reveal that there are few differences across caste groups in the tea estates, and that the same jobs translate into the same incomes across castes. Interestingly, we see that the lowest castes have higher levels of education, indicating an overall preference for investing in this aspect of human capital across generations. We also see that women earn more than men on average.

Table 2 shows the dependent variables that we investigate across all three literatures. We find almost a doubling in years of education between this generation and their parents, and that the lowest caste group continues to invest more in formal education than the higher caste group. We also find high levels of women's savings in formal (bank or post office) and informal (jewelry accumulation) means across caste groups.

Tables 3-6 present regression results (OLS or logistic depending on the form of the outcome variable) of the association between women's earnings share and the dependent variables, with controls. Regressions are run separately for the two caste groups. There are significant results for education, savings, marital violence, and housework for the lowest group (former slave castes), and only for formal savings for the higher group (non-slave castes). The coefficients for housework show an inverted U-shaped relationship, where men perform less housework when women out-earn them, as has been found in previous research. Figures 1 and 2 show predicted probabilities of the significant effects for the former slave castes. The magnitude of the effects are non-trivial across all outcomes.

These results indicate that the lowest caste women use their earnings to prioritize child education and savings at a cost to their own well-being in terms of marital violence and less participation by husbands in housework. They also do not invest in their own healthcare in terms of spending. In contrast, higher caste women's earnings have little effect on these domains, suggesting that they support male authority within the household. Taken together, these findings provide a more complete picture of household dynamics and underscore the potential for women's earnings to narrow persistent caste inequalities in India.

Table 1. Summary statistics for independent variables

	Mean or % (SD)	
	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes
Economic resources		
Wife's income (Rs.)	21,401.6 (4473.3)	21,417.0 (4638.5)
Husband's income (Rs.)	18,630.0 (8774.4)	19,116.2 (9160.1)
Household income (Rs.)	40,031.5 (10,031.9)	40,533.2 (10,521.8)
Wife's earnings share	0.52 (0.21)	0.52 (0.22)
Wife's characteristics		
Age	38.3	38.3
Education (years)	3.9	3.3 ***
Husband's characteristics		
Age	41.6	41.8
Education (years)	5.9	5.5 **
Unemployed	11.2	11.4
Retired	3.2	3.6
Drinks alcohol regularly	26.6	25.6
Family resources		
Spouses are relatives	53.7	64.8 ***
Number of daughters	1.4	1.4
Number of sons	1.5	1.5
N	2171	1010

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; +p<=0.10

Table 2. Summary statistics for outcomes

	Mean or %	
	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes
Household resource allocation		
Children's years of education (ages 16-21)	9.7	9.4 *
Children's secondary school completion (ages 16-21)	55.2	50.6 *
Wife's healthcare expenditures in last year (conditional on illness) (Rs.)	610.5	609.3
Wife has formal savings	61.4	59.0
Wife accumulated jewelry since marriage	80.8	80.1
Recent disagreements over husband's personal spending	11.0	10.1
Marital violence		
Hit by husband in last year	35.6	31.1 *
Husband's current participation in housework tasks		
Usually/sometimes helps with cooking	51.5	50.4
Usually/sometimes helps with childcare	40.3	37.5
Usually/sometimes/rarely helps with washing clothes	10.3	11.9

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; +p<=0.10

Table 3. Human captial investments

	Years of education (children ages 16-21) (OLS)		Secondary school completion (children ages 16-21) (logit)		Wife's healthcare expenditures ^a (ln) (logit)	
	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes
Wife's earnings share	4.317 ***	-0.369	2.858 *	-0.878	-0.822	0.018
Household income (Rs. 1000)	0.086 ***	0.046 *	0.055 ***	0.014	-0.010	0.014 *
Wife's age	0.012	0.035	-0.009	0.016	-0.020	-0.015
Wife's education	0.105 ***	0.086 **	0.077 ***	0.112 ***	-0.002	-0.002
Husband's age	0.031 +	0.001	0.032 +	0.004	0.031	0.014
Husband's education	0.109 ***	0.116 ***	0.104 ***	0.068 **	-0.005	-0.004
Husband unemployed	-1.384 *	0.433	-1.021 +	0.371	0.142	0.028
Husband retired	-1.534 +	1.731	-1.509	1.089	-0.257	0.565
H drinks alcohol regularly	-0.356 **	-0.745 ***	-0.160	-0.611 **	-0.034	0.248 *
Spouses are relatives	-0.152	-0.553 **	-0.088	-0.310 +	0.022	0.107
Number of daughters	-0.377 ***	-0.294 +	-0.207 *	-0.139	-0.057 *	-0.001
Number of sons	-0.288 **	-0.386 *	-0.144	-0.269 *	0.052	-0.111
Child age	0.041	-0.002	-0.071 *	-0.053	--	--
Child boy	-0.235 +	0.239	-0.253 *	0.083	--	--
Private treatment	--	--	--	--	5.358 **	5.756 ***
Constant	1.758	6.792 ***	-3.260 *	0.257	0.908 +	0.012
N	1650	822	1650	822	2042	954

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; +p<=0.10

^a Conditional on having an illness in the last year

Table 4. Household spending (logit)

	Wife has formal savings		Wife accumulated jewelry		Disagreements over husband's personal	
	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes
Wife's earnings share	5.547 ***	14.466 ***	1.234 **	-0.098	-0.261	0.823
Wife's earnings share (squared)	--	-8.327 *	--	--	--	--
Household income (Rs. 1000)	0.078 ***	0.080 ***	0.055 ***	0.059 **	-0.007 *	-0.020
Wife's age	-0.028 ***	-0.084 ***	0.019 ***	0.011	0.003	0.006
Wife's education	-0.022 ***	-0.005	0.020 ***	0.070	-0.060 ***	-0.010
Husband's age	0.005 ***	0.023	0.014	0.025	0.017 +	0.004
Husband's education	-0.006	-0.042 *	0.004	0.010	0.023	-0.007
Husband unemployed	-1.559 ***	0.335	0.630	1.610 **	0.045	-0.320
Husband retired	-1.298 ***	0.329	0.127	0.663	-0.265	-1.201
H drinks alcohol regularly	-0.278 ***	-0.354 *	0.038	0.379 **	2.594 ***	2.797 ***
Spouses are relatives	0.252 **	-0.025	0.229 ***	-0.121	0.088	0.215
Number of daughters	-0.141 ***	0.094 +	0.304 ***	0.224 **	-0.104 **	-0.085
Number of sons	-0.044 ***	0.146 **	0.109 **	-0.112 +	-0.139 ***	-0.213 **
Constant	-4.143 ***	-5.558 ***	-3.490 ***	-2.948 **	-3.401 ***	-3.216 *
N	2169	1009	2169	1009	2171	1010

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; +p<=0.10

Table 5. Marital violence in last year (logit)

	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes
Wife's earnings share	0.878 *	-0.779
Household income (Rs. 1000)	-0.005	-0.006
Wife's age	-0.007	-0.002
Wife's education	-0.002	-0.013
Husband's age	-0.016	-0.027 *
Husband's education	0.008 +	0.010
Husband unemployed	-0.778 ***	0.436
Husband retired	-0.276	0.615
H drinks alcohol regularly	1.276 ***	1.480 ***
Spouses are relatives	-0.166 ***	-0.089
Number of daughters	0.011	-0.057
Number of sons	-0.029 ***	-0.047
Constant	-0.116	0.721 *
N	2171	1010

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; +p<=0.10

Table 6. Husband's current participation in housework tasks (logit)

	Cooking		Child care		Clothes washing	
	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes	Former slave castes	Non-slave castes
Wife's earnings share	3.179 +	4.476	6.421 +	-3.281	11.983 *	-6.395
Wife's earnings share (squared)	-3.667 +	-4.454	-8.661 *	2.489	-13.498 **	8.410 *
Household income (Rs. 1000)	0.003	-0.017 +	-0.048 ***	-0.011	-0.001	0.009
Wife's age	-0.017 ***	-0.024 *	-0.061 ***	-0.052 ***	-0.015 +	0.007
Wife's education	0.016 +	-0.019	0.034 ***	0.035 +	0.009	-0.070
Husband's age	-0.014 ***	0.005	-0.059 ***	-0.053 ***	-0.024 *	-0.036 ***
Husband's education	0.003	0.032 *	-0.008	0.002	0.038	0.028
Husband unemployed	1.358 +	0.531	2.306 ***	-0.140	4.282 ***	-3.200 **
Husband retired	1.253	-0.206	3.184 ***	1.298	5.037 ***	-3.869 *
H drinks alcohol regularly	-0.127	0.106	-0.158	-0.152	-0.336 *	-0.159
Spouses are relatives	0.088	0.151	-0.035	0.243	-0.022 *	-0.289
Number of daughters	-0.135 **	-0.074	0.019	0.036	-0.048	-0.229 **
Number of sons	-0.036	0.078 *	0.001	0.093	-0.050	-0.052
At least one child <age 16	--	--	1.458 ***	1.422 ***	--	--
Constant	0.634 *	0.180	4.108 ***	3.455 ***	-3.259 ***	0.583
N	2171	1010	2171	1010	2171	974

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; +p<=0.10

Figure 1. Predicted Probabilities by Wife's Earnings Share for Former Slave Castes

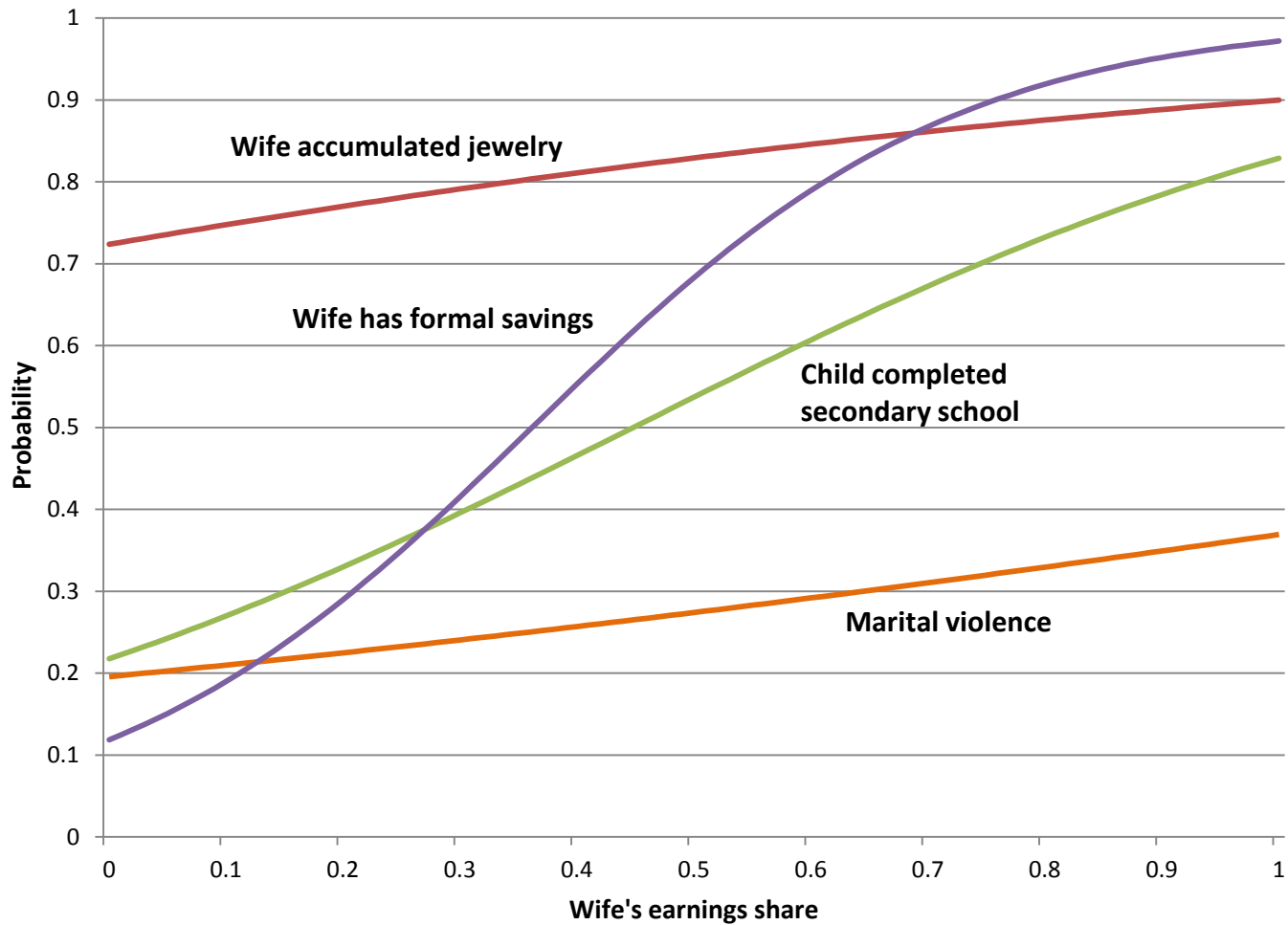


Figure 2. Predicted Probabilities by Wife's Earnings Share for Former Slave Castes

