

# Women’s Agency and Empowerment: a Critical Analysis of the Role of Education in India

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**ABSTRACT:** Education is supposed to empower women by making them self-dependent and enabling them to think, reason, take their own decisions and protect themselves from oppression and abuse. It helps improve their lives and health of their families and society at large. However, India’s educated, modern women still face widespread gender inequality and often internalize conservative attitudes towards women’s social roles. Every third woman, since the age of 15, has faced domestic violence of various forms in the country, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) reported. According to the 2012 IHDS Survey, 79.8% of the women in India need permission to visit a health centre while only 4.99% of women had sole control over choosing their husbands. The education of women must enable them to be a part of the society and contribute effectively thereby improving their social well-being. This paper argues that the current education system does not expand the choices of a woman and does not enable her to exercise her agency effectively. It has not helped in changing the negative attitude of people. In spite of education, women in India are subjugated throughout their lifespan and are committed to patriarchy. Therefore, it is high time that the education system in India helps to change one’s thought process and social attitude to achieve social well-being.

**KEYWORDS:** Education, empower, women, agency, oppression, conservative, social well-being, patriarchy

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Date of Submission: 04-08-2022

Date of Acceptance: 17-08-2022

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Women education has always been a vital part of the various schemes and policies of the Indian Government due to its importance in the overall development of the country (Bhat, 2015) and also because of the prevailing gender discrimination in the country. The National Curriculum Framework of Women says, “Education of women is an important key to improving health, nutrition and education in the family and also empowering them to participate in decision making” (Prasad, 2017). Improving women’s agency is critical for advancing gender equality and women empowerment (Donald et al., 2017) for which education becomes a powerful tool. Talking about women’s agency, Nobel Prize winner and famous economist Amartya Sen (2000, August) in his book *Development as Freedom*, says that women are seen as the dynamic promoters of social transformation that can alter the lives of both women and men. He defined agency as what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important. Today, more and more women are educated. The literacy rate of the country is increasing but the crimes against them are also increasing. According to a report *Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity* by the World Bank Group, in spite of the increasing enrolment rates, women lack sexual and reproductive rights, they face violence, their work choices remain restricted (Klugman et al., 2014). Women face gender discrimination from the day they are born; from what to wear, how to sit and how to behave. This gender stereotyping leads to the lack in the confidence of women in their ability to compete with men who are stereotypically believed to perform better. Thus, it becomes important to question the role of education in improving the agency of women.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Review of literature helps the researcher to better understand the issue and also to plan and execute the research from the experience of others. Thus, it fills the voids of the previous research and helps in making it more meaningful. The main objective of this paper is to study the role of education in the agency of women. So, we will review some of the earlier studies done in this area that would help in the present study.

Various writers have highlighted the role of education for the empowerment of women. The National Policy on Education (1986) emphasized the promotion of women’s education in all areas of learning to eliminate any sex-based stereotyping with the guarantee of equality before the law.

Guérin et al. (2013) point out that women are “not necessarily looking for autonomy and independence from men, but rather for respect within their own community”.

Bhat (2015) analysed that education is the most powerful tool to confront their traditional role and change their position in society. Agrawal and Kukreti (2016) conclude that literacy is the only solution for empowering

women. The study by Halakerimath and Danappagoudra (2018) finds that educating women at higher level improves the social participation and status of women in society.

Dr. Sunil Kumar Sain and Dr.SudhirSudamKaware (n.d.) in their paper titled '*Impact of Education in Women's Empowerment in India*' point out the role that higher education plays in enabling the creativity of women. They acknowledge women as potential human resources who can be trained in developing their capacity and with decision-making abilities by education to achieve the best for themselves and the country. Shweta Singh, KanchanLata Sinha and V.P.Agrawal in their paper titled '*Empowering Women through Higher Education*' (2018) have discussed and evaluated the current status of women in higher education and identified the obstacles in the path of women empowerment such as social norms, workplace sexual harassment, gender discrimination, crimes against women.

In a paper titled '*Conceptual Understanding of women empowerment in India*', Mamatha BS (2018) points out that only promoting education would not change the deep-rooted culture for women in Indian society but women need to self-empower themselves. She links empowerment with personal agency.

### OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this research paper is to study whether education in India has helped women to use their agency effectively or not. Also the paper attempts to understand whether education empowers women or not.

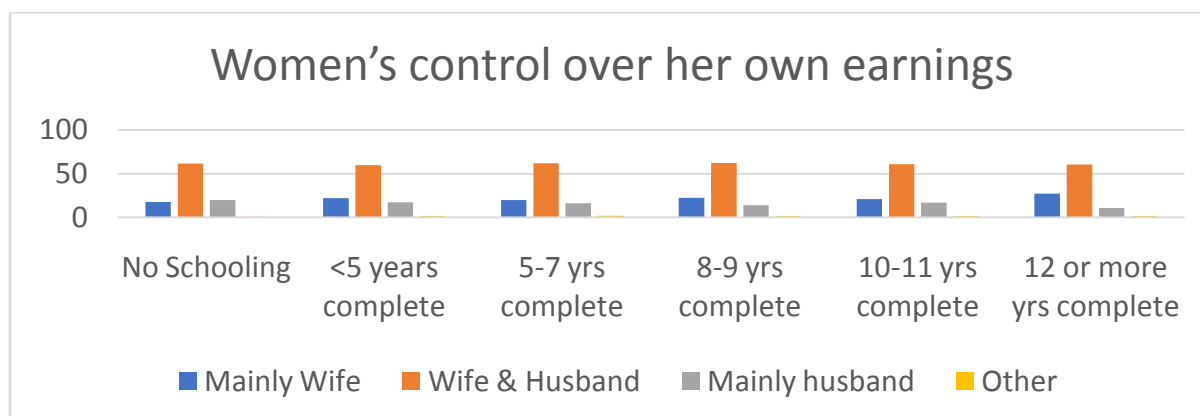
### III. METHODOLOGY

This paper is basically descriptive in nature. An attempt has been made to analyse the effect of education on the empowerment of women in India. The data used in it is purely in the form of secondary sources according to the need of the study. The available data has been presented in the form of suitable graphs.

#### POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

In the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), there is a separate section of women empowerment based on various parameters. I chose some of them to study them on the basis of education and how do they vary according to different levels of education of women. The sample consists of married women aged 15-49 years.

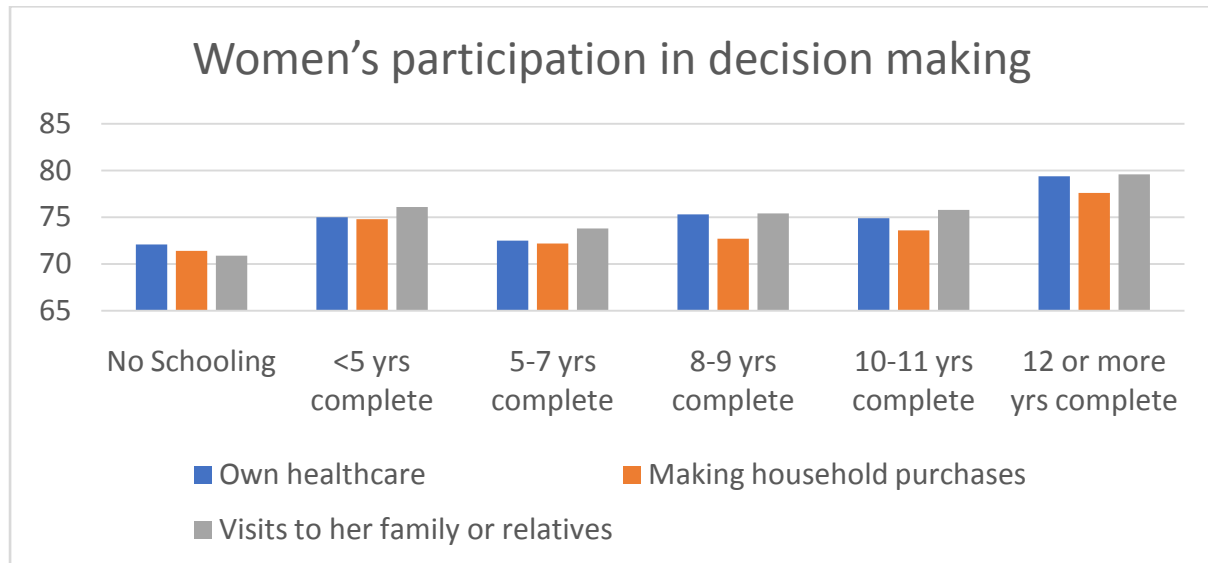
**1. Control over women's earnings:** Eighty-two percent of currently married women who earn cash say that they make decisions alone or jointly with their husband on how their cash earnings are used. It is most common for women to make these decisions jointly with their husband. For 17 percent of women, the husband is the sole decision maker regarding the use of women's earnings. Women's control over their own earnings tends to increase only a little with schooling. The data provided gives a brief idea of the effect of education on women empowerment. Graph 1 shows that the control tends to increase only a little with schooling. Only 21% of the women took the decision alone on how and where to spend their earnings. NFHS also states that the women's participation in decision making about her own earnings has more or less remained unchanged in the last 10 years while we know that much progress has been made in the enrolment of women for education in these years. This clears that education has failed to do much in enabling women to make their own decisions.



**Graph No. 1:** Variation of Women's control over her own earnings with education

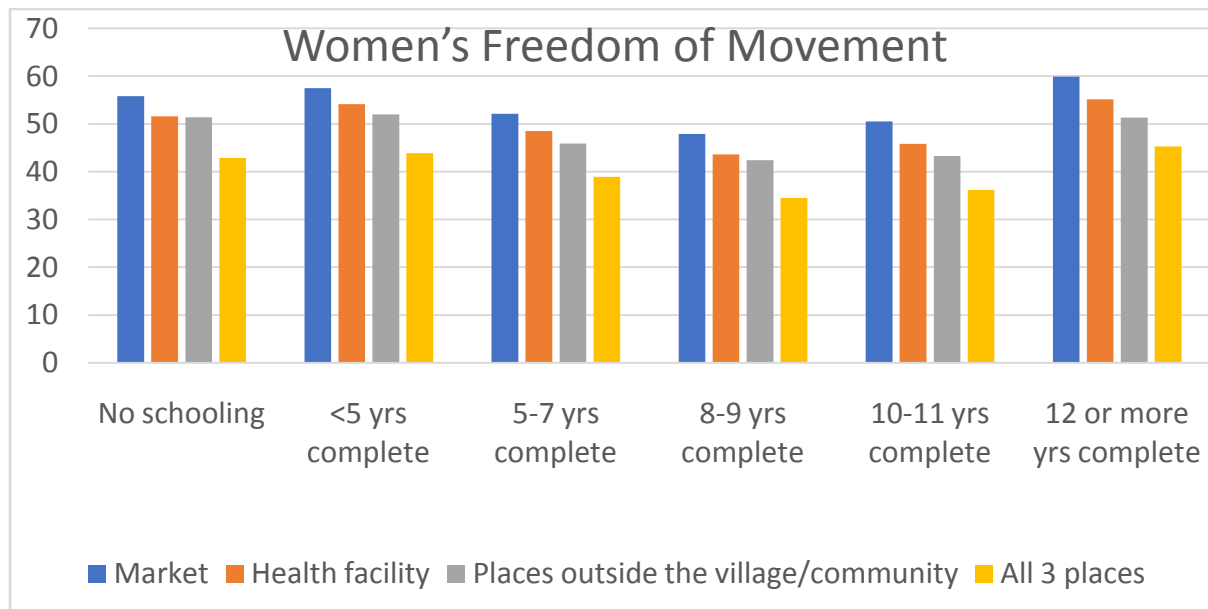
**2. Women's participation in decision-making:** Almost two-thirds (63%) of women participate in all three specified household decisions alone or jointly with their husband and 16 percent do not participate in any of the three (woman's own health care, major household purchases, visits to the woman's family or relatives). Graph 2 shows that women's participation in decision making does not vary consistently with women's schooling. Thus, we may conclude that education does not play a significant role in their decision making. It depends on her

husband or her in-laws to decide when she needs to visit her family or a doctor for her own health. This is the condition of a woman in her own house. She has to do all the household chores but when it comes to purchases, she does not have a say. Her education has not given her liberty to decide for the household purchases that have to be made.



**Graph no. 2:** Variation in Women's participation in decision making with education

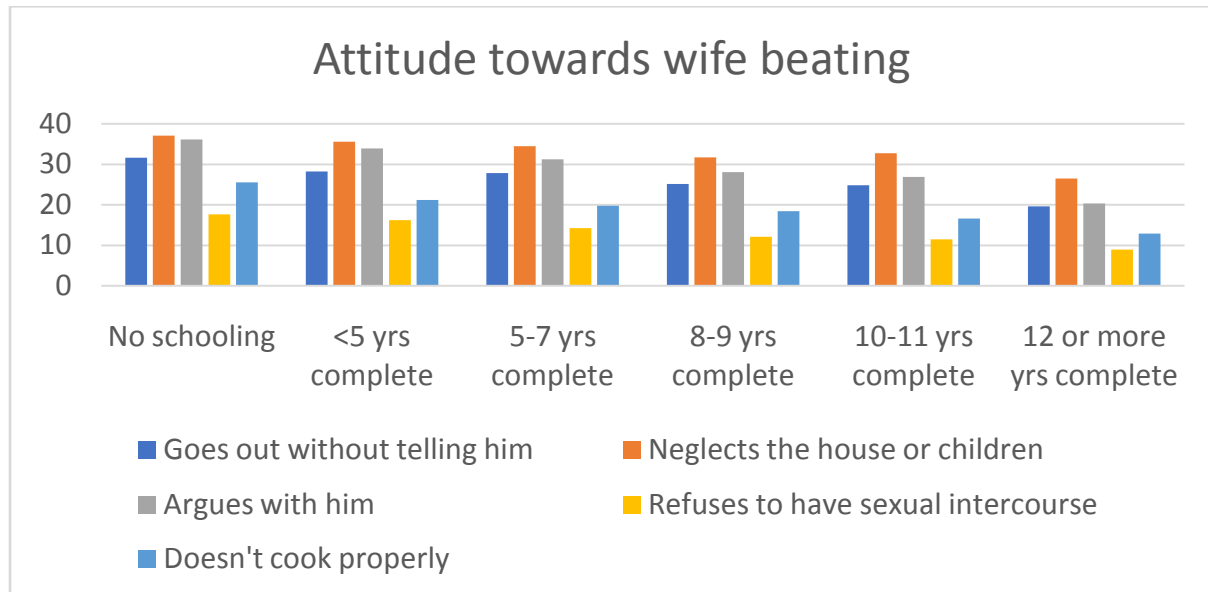
**3. Women's Freedom of Movement:** Fifty-four percent of women are allowed to go alone to the market, 50 percent to the health facility, and 48 percent to places outside the village or community. Overall, only 41 percent of women in India are allowed to go alone to all three places and 6 percent are not allowed to go alone to any of the three places. In Graph 3 we see the variation of education with the freedom of movement of women. Here again, we do not find a consistent variation with schooling. Their education does not allow them freedom of movement. They cannot go to markets or their community or to avail any health facility without the consent of her husband or in-laws. Even if a woman is suffering, she cannot go to visit healthcare without her in-law's permission. Education did not help in bringing any change in the attitude.



**Graph no. 3:** Variation in Women's freedom of movement with education

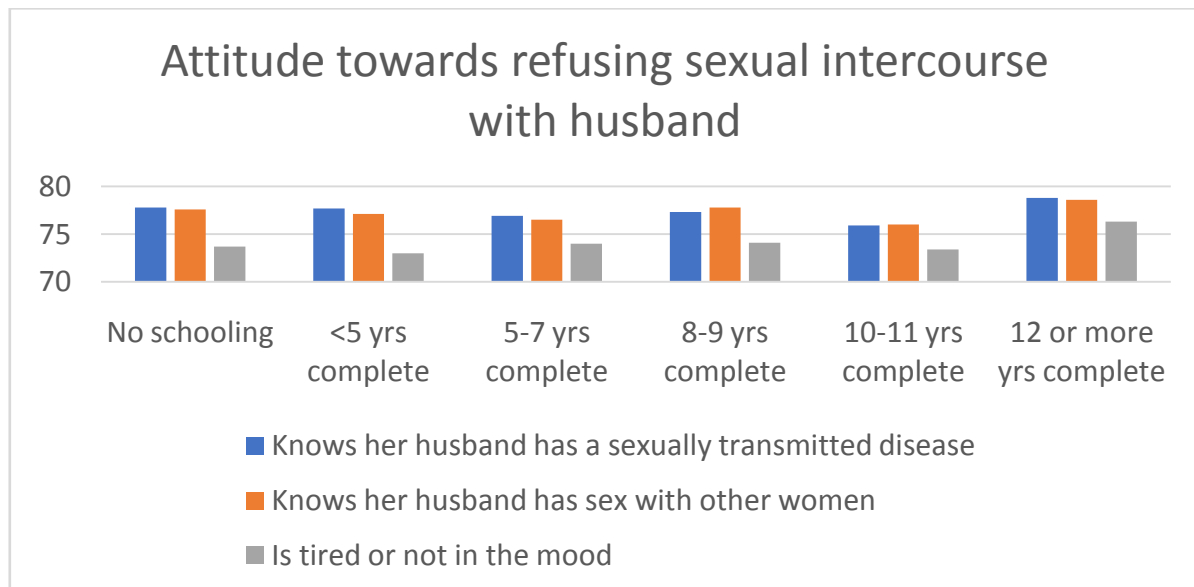
**4. Attitude towards wife-beating:** Fifty-two percent of women believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife in specific circumstances. For both women and men, agreement with wife-beating tends to decrease with schooling. For example, agreement declines from 59 percent among women with no schooling to 43 percent

among women with 12 or more years of schooling. In Graph 4, we see that the agreement of wife-beating declines with schooling. Although the decline shows some positivity still the numbers are alarming. 52 percent of women and 42 percent of men believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife in certain circumstances. The attitudes have not changed much when it comes to controlling of a wife by her husband.



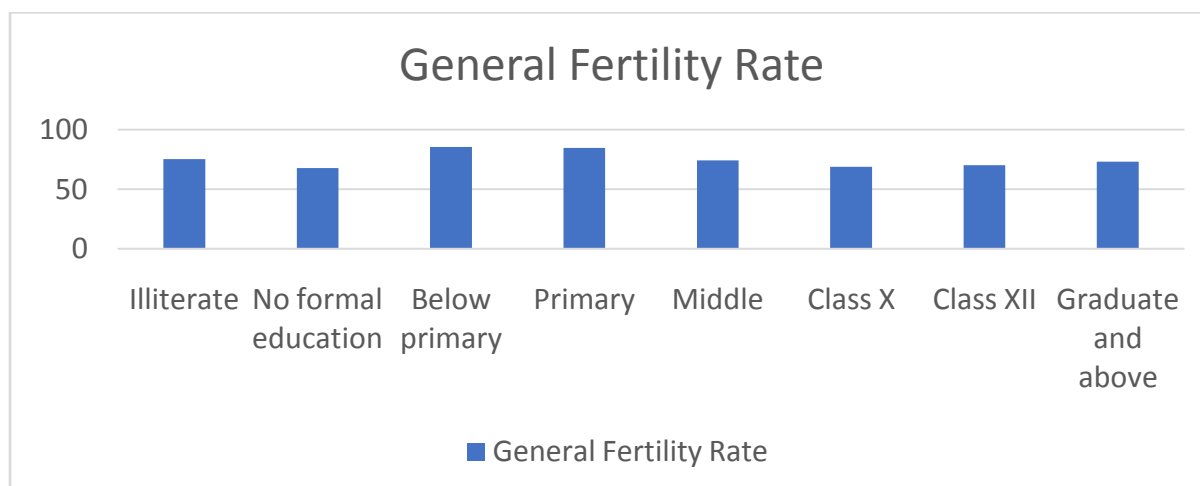
**Graph no. 4:** Variation in attitude towards wife beating with education

**5. Attitude towards refusing sexual intercourse with husband:** The majority of women (68%) in India believe that a woman is justified in refusing sex to her husband for all of the three specified reasons (if she knows he has a sexually transmitted disease, she knows he has sex with other women, and she is tired or not in the mood). Seventeen percent of women and 15 percent of men do not agree that a wife can refuse sex for any of the three reasons. There is little consistent variation in women's and men's agreement with women's right to refuse sex to their husbands for all three specified reasons with schooling. Graph 5 reveals that there is a very little variation with schooling in this regard. We see no significant role of education in this parameter. Sexual and reproductive choice is the right of a woman. She needs to make decisions of her body and how she controls it. But even today it is considered a private affair in the country and education has made no major change in the attitudes of both men and women.



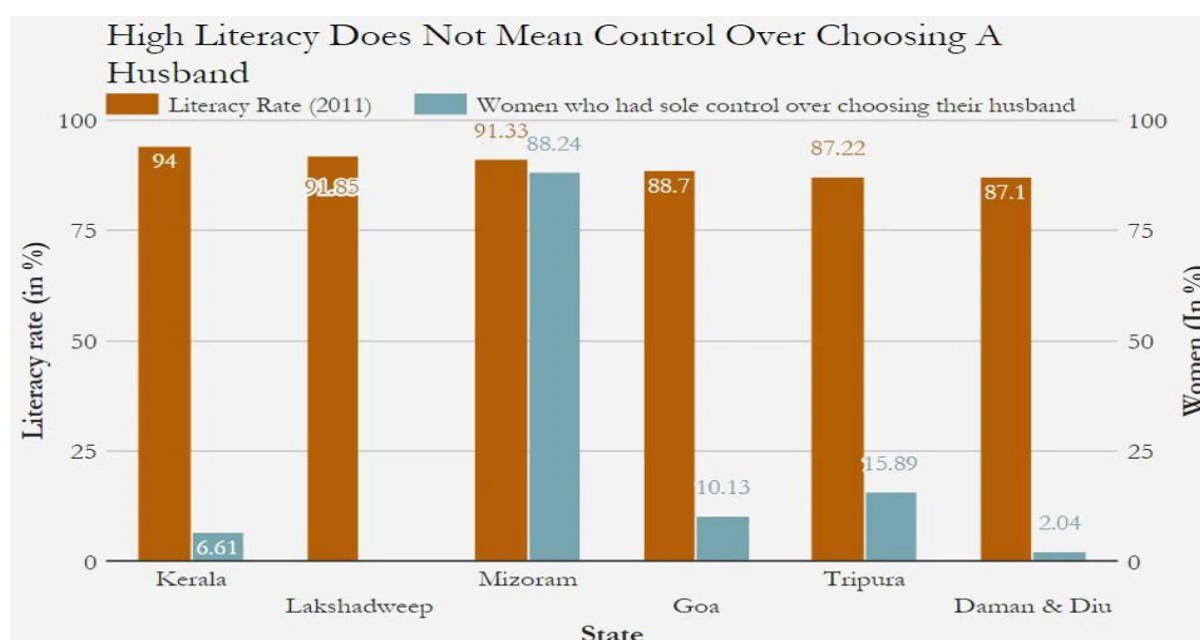
**Graph no. 5:** Variation in attitude towards sexual intercourse with husband with education

**6. General Fertility Rate:** According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2018, the general fertility rate does not vary consistently with the level of education. In 2016, it is 75.2 for the illiterate while its 73.2 for graduate and above. There is no significant difference between the two. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2018, General fertility rate is defined as the number of live births per thousand women in the age group (15-49 years) in a given year. The graph 6 reveals that the General Fertility Rate does not vary consistently with education. There is no significant difference between the GFR of an illiterate and a graduate.



**Graph no. 6:** Variation in General Fertility Rate with education

**7. Choice of Husband:** According to the India Human Development Survey 2012, states with a high literacy rate do not mean a higher control over choosing a husband (The Hindustan Times, 2017). In Delhi, which has a literacy rate of 86.21% (higher than the national average of 74.04%), only 2.09% of women reported they had sole control over choosing their husband. The India Human Development Survey 2012 conducted a survey by comparing the highest literate states of the country and the sole control of their women in choosing their husbands. The graph 7 shows a striking difference in this. Even the states with the highest literacy do not show any control of women in making a choice of their life partner. Thus, higher literacy does not mean control over choosing husband.



Source: India Human Development Survey 2012

Note: States with the the highest literacy rates in India

**Graph no. 7:** Variation in control over choosing a husband with literacy rate

**8. Crime against women:** The literacy rate for females has increased to 65.46% (Census 2011) and so has the crime rate. The rate of crime against women-crimes per 100,000 female population was 55.2 in 2016, up from 16.3 in 2007. This shows that, even though women literacy rate is increasing, violence against them is not decreasing, but increasing with time. So, it indicates that improving the educational level of women might not correlate with a decline in domestic violence. Several studies in India show that education had no effect on domestic violence. According to a study by SwapnaMajumdar, a Women's ENews correspondent in New Delhi; in India, domestic violence rises with education (Women's ENews, 2003).

The female participation in the labour force has dropped from 34% in 1999 to a low of 27% in 2014 (Salve, 2016). Also, the female participation in the labour force has dropped from 1999 till 2015. This decline in workforce participation in recent times points to the fact that just access to education is not needed, but access to quality education is a must, in order to overturn centuries of entrenched prejudice against women.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

All of this data is a piece of evidence that the current education system is lacking somewhere and is not leading to the empowerment of women. It is not helping women to take their own decisions and to live an independent life. It does not expand the choices of women. They have become the agents of patriarchy. They themselves do not feel right if they take their own decisions. They justify the beating by their husband under certain circumstances. Education has not helped in changing the attitudes of women or men. It has not led to the broadening of their mental landscape. Educated women achieve some kind of financial independence but in spite of that they do not take financial decisions at home. Patriarchy has become a prime obstacle to the empowerment of women. Women are not able to make effective use of their agency. Their agency is moulded by social obligations. Today's education has become only a matter of degrees. People are running behind degrees as much as they can without imbibing the real meaning of education. The essence of education is lost somewhere. We need such a system of education that promotes critical thinking, one that promotes rationality.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In spite of the improving enrolment rates in India, the situation of women has not improved. The literacy rate is increasing but it does not improve the position of women. Recent statistics shows that there is very less effect of education on various parameters of empowerment. Women are getting literate but are not getting empowered. This shows that the present discourse on education is short-sighted. It does not give the required power to women. The education system has to help women learn to exercise their agency effectively. Quality education has to be ensured to achieve cultural transformation and bring attitudinal change. Shedding patriarchy and creating a culture of respecting women is required. Education needs to empower women so that they may lead a just, fair and happy life. Though Indian government is working in improving the education system of the country, yet there is a strong need to take some sincere and intensive effort in working towards the empowerment of women. This paper is intended to give a thought on the education system of the country and what necessary efforts need to be made to ensure quality education in the country that may help everyone. This world belongs to everyone.

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Saman Zaheer. "Women's Agency and Empowerment: a Critical Analysis of the Role of Education in India." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 11(08), 2022, pp 37-43. Journal DOI- 10.35629/7722