

Indian Urban Expansion: A Path to Women’s Empowerment?

KID: 20240209



India is on the brink of an unprecedented urban transformation, with its urban population expected to grow by 416 million between 2018 and 2050. According to the World Urbanization Prospects Report (2019), around 34% of India’s population currently resides in cities, a figure projected to rise to over 53% by mid-century.

This dramatic demographic shift brings both opportunities and challenges, particularly in the context of Sustainable Development Goal 11, which aims to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.” One of the critical questions arising from this urban expansion is: Is rapid urbanization empowering women, or is it deepening existing gender inequalities?

In a recent study (Dhamija et al. 2025), we examine the short-term implications of urbanization on women’s empowerment in India. The study leverages district-level satellite data on nighttime lights to measure urbanization. Extant literature documents that light intensity per unit area correspond to a reasonable measure of the degree of urbanization. Using data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) for 2015-16 and 2019-21, the study explores key indicators of women’s empowerment, including participation in the labor market, physical mobility, financial autonomy, intra-household decision-making power, access to information, attitudes and exposure toward intimate partner violence (IPV).

The findings present a complex reality. On the one hand, urbanization is positively associated with improved mobility for women — suggesting that women in urban areas experience greater freedom of movement. However, beyond this single improvement, the study finds no significant relationship between urbanization and other key indicators of empowerment such as labor market participation, intra-household decision-making power, access to information, financial autonomy, and gender beliefs.

Even more concerning is the study’s revelation that urbanization is associated with an increased risk of IPV against women.

At first glance, the coexistence of improved mobility and heightened IPV risk may seem contradictory. However, the study suggests two possible explanations. One is the male backlash effect. As women gain mobility and visibility in public spaces, some men may perceive this as a threat to traditional gender norms, leading to an increase in controlling behaviors and even violence.

Another factor could be rising stress levels in urban environments. While cities offer opportunities, they also bring higher stress levels due to economic pressures, job insecurity, and housing constraints. These stressors could, in turn, exacerbate household conflicts and fuel IPV incidents.

These findings suggest that rather than bridging gender disparities, urbanization might, in some cases, worsen existing inequalities. If policymakers do not take proactive measures, India’s rapid urban expansion could further marginalize women instead of empowering them.

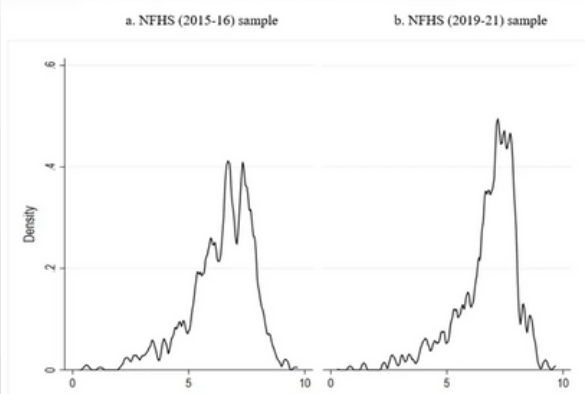
References:

Dhamija, G., Roychowdhury, P., & Shankar, B. (2025). Does urbanization empower women? Evidence from India. *Journal of Population Economics*, 38(1), 27.

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, Pelletier, F., Bassarsky, L., Gu, D., Hertog, S., Lai, M. S., Sawyer, C., Spoorenberg, T., Zhang, G., Ribeiro, I., Koshy, N., & Swiaczny, F. (2019). *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision*.

In *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision*. United Nations. https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/files/documents/2020/Jan/un_2018_wup_report.pdf

Distribution of log of nighttime lights (LNL) for the districts surveyed in NFHS 2015-16 and 2019-21.



“ While cities offer opportunities, they also bring higher stress levels due to economic pressures, job insecurity, and housing constraints. ”

Dr Gaurav Dhamija
Assistant Professor, Dept of Liberal Arts