



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)
UGC Approved Journal (SL NO. 2800)
Volume-III, Issue-VI, May 2017, Page No. 133-140
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

Gender and Decision Making in Contemporary Family – A study in southern Assam

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Abstract

In patriarchal social structure, women are for all time sanctioned subjugated status in men-women relation. Since in patriarchal social structure in India, family is headed by a male folk and it is authoritarian by nature. Women's subjugated status in family is manifested in all aspects including decision making too. Marxist theory of feminisms narrates women subjugation as a result of emergence of private property and unequal control over means of production. Radical feminism holds view women marginality derives not from biological factors rather cultural factor. Again resource theory of marital relation holds the view that power is associated with resources brought in to marriage by each spouse. In gender biased stratification system economic resources controlled by men are given more importance than the resources possessed by women (competency in domestic work, socialization and the like). In contemporary family, owing to changing status of women when both husband and wife are earning. If economic resource is a sources of power to men. Earning women must have ideal position in decision making. But does it really happen? In order to explore the fact, the paper aims to study the role of economic status of women in decision making authority in a changing family system. The study will be conducted in southern part of Assam. It will be quasi experimental study using multi stage cluster sampling technique.

Introduction: Family- the basic unit of human society is a tryst of two genders. It exists on mutual co-operation and obligation of husband and wife who are bonded in to marital relation. Hierarchical relation which is all pervasive in institutions is also prevailing in familial relation too. In academic discourse, intra-familial marital relation of power and autonomy between male and female gender in general and husband and wife in particular is the focal point of study. Unequal distribution of power and autonomy in family is reflected in unequal right to decision making too. Decision making is founding pillar of family. Success or failure of family perambulates on decision. Resource theory of marital power suggests that the decision-making power of each spouse is directly dependent upon the context to which that spouse attributes valued resources to the marriage. A valued resource is typically defined as anything one partner may make available to the other, helping the

latter to satisfy his or her needs (Blood & Wolfe, 1960). By resource it means economically self-sufficiency and educational empowerment of women. Since role of women in contemporary Indian family tends to change owing to different forces of women empowerment and modernization. In a contemporary family generally both husband and wife are earning. Many families sustain on women income only. Since economic resource is a source of power to men. Earning women must have ideal position in decision making. Sociological studies also focus on power and autonomy of working women than non-working (Ramu, 2007). Thus; role of resources in decision making authority in a changing family system needs to be examined.

In patriarchal social structure power and authority of family vested on male member. Although earliest stages of human history is characterized by egalitarianism but the system started to change with the emergence of private property. With the advent of private property system, some group members claim economic resource as their own, it marked the genesis of male domination and female subordination. However, liberal feminism believes in gender equality and rejects subordination of one sex by other. They assume division in gender role as division of labour in family. Since women are best suited in house hold work and child rearing etc so they are assigned to perform it. Radical feminism assumes that oppression and domination are pervasive in every social institution. It is culturally arranged. In patriarchal social structure the most fundamental arena of oppression is gender based. Patriarchy is known to be the historically first structure of domination and subordination and continues to be the most pervasive and enduring system of inequality. It is the basic representation of domination. Again, Marxian feminism recognizes women subordination as social and discards it as biological or natural. It is the social arrangement that has attributed subordinate status of women (Barett.1985). The rational base for women subordination lies in the family- an institution appositely named from Latin word 'servant', because the family as it exists in complex society is overwhelmingly a system of dominate and subordinate role. Society legitimizes the family system by claiming that such a structure is the fundamental institution in all societies. The earliest society of human history aptly named as primitive communism by Marxist is characterized by egalitarianism. Power was exercised collectively and co-operatively. Equality was reflected in communal living arrangement, commodity use, child rearing and decision making. The system started to change with the emergence of private property, the idea and reality of some group members, claiming their authority as essential for economic reproduction was the genesis of male domination and hence women subordination.

In patriarchal social structure, India witnesses the tradition of joint families headed by male member as authority. Subjugated status of women in Indian context is religiously sanctioned and culturally approved. In countries like India where extended families are common, parents are endowed with sole authority to decide about marriage. In Indian family women in general and daughter in law or *Bahu* in particular are expected to carry out the decision taken by male. Their own liberties are truncated and compel to obey decision of husband only. Conversely women accorded the status of laws such as mother in law and

sister in laws have some autonomy in family affair which are strictly restricted in case of daughter in laws. In-marriage affairs laws including feminine species such as mothers-in-law or an elder sister-in-law could as well hold significant decision-making power (Safilios-Rothschild 1982). A little other study also focuses on women autonomy in decision making privately with her husband. Despite the fact that patriarchal joint family in India denies autonomy and power of wife in family, but women can decide with her husband privately in many of family interests (Kakar, 1981). But the phenomenon is socially latent. It is neither recognized nor accepted by society. Women as wife are normatively excluded in participating in any of the decision making. In traditional joint family it is by age and status women acquire power in intra-house hold decisions. But the key authority pertaining to economic, health related and political decisions are remain exclusively by male folk.

However, authoritarian nature of family is not evident in modern society as it was in traditional society. And many studies hint on women inclusion in decision making such as Kapadia (1966), Gore (1968). In contemporary family, women are found to credit herself as equal in power role in budgetary management, in family expenditure, in child socialization, in purchasing goods and giving gifts. Notwithstanding, position of women in India has improved owing laws pertaining to women's employment, effect of education, leadership provided by educated elite women, increasing opportunities of employment, change in the rigidity of caste system, and opportunities of employment, change in the rigidity of the caste system and so on. But it is restricted only to a minor segment only. Exclusion and fidelity are reality of large segments of Indian women even four decade later of above studies. The women species are systematically excluded in terms of economy, politics, culture, health, property and power and autonomy in family. It is reported that 60 per cent of the Indian women living in villages are married below 18 years of age indicates the near negligible involvement of women in the most important decision of their lives. ([www.The Tribune](http://www.TheTribune.com), Chandigarh, India -2007 Editorial.htm) It is, therefore, reflects the reasons of woman's assertion to choose a partner is considered almost revolutionary in a society that does not even permit a woman to decide about the age and timing of her marriage. According to a 1992-93 survey, in Punjab which is otherwise known for its affluence and modern outlook, the percentage of mother hood in the 13-19 years age group was 64.4 per cent, thus indicating that the most basic decision of whether or not to have a baby and when to have a baby was not at the hands of the mother. The reasons for the negligible or little involvement of women are the most fundamental decisions of their lives are numerous. While many prefer to accept it because of economic dependence and others continue to suffer to avoid the wrath of society. A woman being the decision-maker regarding the basic and the most fundamental issues of marriage and child birth might appear as a far-fetched thought, in a society where she does not even have the liberty to decide if she can visit her relatives or the kind of food to be cooked. A survey revealed, more than 80 per cent of women from states as diverse as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh have to seek prior permission from their husbands or in-laws before visiting friends or relatives. In Uttar Pradesh, about one-third women do not have the liberty to decide what is to be cooked at home. ([www.Tribune](http://www.Tribune.com), Chandigarh, India - Editorial.htm) There was a similar case at the

same cell wherein the husband refused to live with his wife after five months of their marriage. In this case wife is abandoned and alleged not to put up with her husband's decisions; like once when he asked her to wake up at 5 a.m., she instead woke up at 5.30 a.m.

In this dynamic backdrop the present paper aims to explore the role of resources in decision making authority in contemporary family system. Universe of the study is southern Assam. It is a quasi-experimental study. Purposive random samples of 50 women have been collected. Each 50 have been equally collected from working and non-working women. Data have been collected with structured questionnaire from southern Assam. Research question of the module paper pertaining to:

- (i) Whether women in general participate in decision making for their domestic life.
- (ii) Whether employed women have more power and autonomy in decision making than unemployed women.
- (iii) Whether educated unemployed women are also acquire power and autonomy in decision making of their domestic life.

In this backdrop two hypotheses have been selected to analyse the facts
H1 : women in the study area have equal power and autonomy in family
Ho: Women have no power and autonomy and power in family.

Profile of the Respondents: All the respondents educated. Their educational level may vary from primary to doctorate level. They are within the age group of 25 to 60 years. All of them hail from nuclear family structure of urban and semi urban areas. In order to test these hypotheses respondents are asked to respond in following aspects: 1. Decision about number of children. 2. Gap between children 3. Choice about children's education. 4. Choice of friends and entertaining them 5) Gift to relatives 6) Choice of parent staying 7) Choice on your treatment in case of or sickness like consultation with doctor 8) Buying property like car/house 9) Decision about savings 10) Decision about jewellery purchase 11) How much to spent on domestic 12) Decision regarding family recreation 13) Choice an political party 14) Caste vote in the choice of. Their power and autonomy in is tested assed with 3 point scale. For each aspect they are to reply as :(a) me (b) both (c) husband. For me 3 point is awarded that she decides exclusively in family affairs. For both 2 point is awarded as decision is taken jointly by couple .And for Response to husband only 1 point is awarded as wife does not have any role in decision making. Data states that in regarding response to question related to number of children and gap between children all the respondents have replied that decision have been taken jointly by them. This indicates male folk in this locality are not authoritarian in nature. In regarding reproduction of child they do not insists on wives. Rather respect on wife's desire and will too. Thus, all respondents have replied "Our children are born at both of our decision. There is not a single case reported to be found that wife has to reproduce child under compulsion of husband's desire. All the couples have either single or two children. Many of them have only girl child. None of the respondents' are reported to find to give birth of second or third child under the force of their partner's

wish for boy baby. Which focus on changing outlook and attitude towards women. As regard as decision on children's education is concern, out of 50 respondents 35 respondents have replied that decision is taken jointly by the couple. None of the unemployed wife has taken decision exclusive of husbands. Whilst among working ladies only 2 respondents are reported to be independent to take decision in regarding children education. In both the group 19 respondents admits their confidence on husband in regarding the education of child. As regard as decision on invitation to guest in family it is found that little more than half of the respondents of both categories decide jointly with their partner. Remaining ten of them have expressed their autonomy and ten have expressed their dependency in this regard. In reply to question *why* their reply is that husband might have problem on that day. Moreover, for arrangement they may have to depend on husband. Forty percent of the employed respondents (10 out of 25) have express that they are liberal in regarding the decision on gifts given to guests. Two of the employed respondents and eight unemployed respondents depend on husband in this aspect. In regarding decision on staying with husband's parent or siblings all but 3 working respondents depend on husband's decision. In regarding illness of family member or respondents 'themselves data focus on mutual obligation of couple is prior in all most all the cases. As many as a quarter of working lady and over a third of their non-working counterpart depend solely on husband's decision. Only two numbers of working lady can take decision by herself. So far as economic affairs such as property purchase and savings of the respondents are concern, none but six respondents have autonomy in decision making. However in these two aspects joint decision of couple are mostly occurred as focused by data. In the same way, in distributing the monthly expenditure on different house hold items too joint choice of couple is prior over single autonomy of either of them. In regarding family recreation, decision is taken jointly by both husband and wife. In regarding the choice on political party 60 percent of the respondents can take independent decision. In this category a little less than half of the house wife belongs to. Out of 50 respondents 26 respondents are reported to caste vote exclusively on their choice 17 of them are employed. Unfortunately, 40 percent of unemployed respondents depend on husband's decision to caste vote. However significant difference of chi-square value of all the above mentioned aspect shows that values of difference is less than .05 on some of the aspects like decision on children education, savings, property purchase, and distribution of expenditure in domestic items indicates null hypothesis (Ho) is accepted and alternative hypotheses (Ha) is rejected. This finding throws light that women in this locality are also depending on men in deciding about key affairs of family. While in other aspects it is focused on respondents' proficiency as well as liberty to decide about different family affairs.

The study as a whole testifies evidences of better status of wife in the family irrespective of her economic position. As it is upheld by resource theory, that educational and economic sufficiency play influential role in exercising power in the family, in this case it may be assumed that since all the respondents are educated and half of them are employed these two may contributes to perk up the status of power and autonomy of women in family. Further, their families are nuclear in structure with conjugal unit; women are getting more

opportunities to put into effect their autonomy. In such families husband's fraternal and filial relations are not preponderant enough. Power in such family does not vested on male head rather on husband. In such situation it is easier for wife to assume authority assert right from her husband. However, enhance autonomy is ceased to peripheral affairs such as children education, gift to relatives etc, even these decisions are never taken by wife alone rather jointly by couple.

The data shows working women's are to some extent more independent than non-working women as a whole. But in key areas such as decision related to savings of family, distribution of house hold expenditure on different items main concern is given to husbands' decision in the family of dual earning couple too. Employed women, being earner must interfere but never take decision without authorizing the husband. Correspondingly, each and every one of the non working women does not have any concern about financial affairs rather they feel happy to be tilted towards their husband in this regard. The facts may lead to presume husbands' coercive attitude that compel women to rely on their marital partner for taking decision. But it is indeed the culture of fidelity not husband's coercive nature that contributes to sustain women dependency on husband which may not be keeping away from economically self sufficient women too. As liberal feminism upholds division of gender role is nothing but division of labour in family. Women in India are internalise the values of male dominance self subordinate in family. Thus the values cannot be renounced. Because these values exists in such a way as they are external to society. Society too exerts a pressure upon its member to carry out these values. Thus mere education and earning is not sufficient to make women to be inconsistent with normative behavior of society. Hence, women dependency arises spontaneously towards their husband while taking key decision. It is the culture of gender role that perpetuate the women to depend spontaneously on their husband which is reflected vividly in the attitude of non working women particularly. It is not that their husbands are always coercive to govern women. To conclude, it may be stated that the changing educational and economic status also changes position of women in family. These two are influential objects and promoting wheels to enhance women's power and autonomy in decision making process. But these changes are not in contradictory to normative attitude rather it keeps peace with socially approved role of women. Husbands' traditional authority is not replaced by wives rather it is conjecture of conjugal bond. It is not total shift of power rather some inclusions. The change and continuity in the structure are there by accelerated and ensured.

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Table-1: Respondents' Decision making process On Different Aspects

Sl. No.	Item	Unemployed				Employed (Percentage in parenthesis)				Significance
		Husband	Both	Me	Total	Husband	Both	Me	Total	
1	Children education.	11 (44.0)	14 (56.0)	-----	25 (100.0)	2 (8.0)	21 (84.0)	2 (8.0)	25 (100.0)	.008
2	Invitation to guests.	14 (56.0)	7 (28.0)	4 (16.0)	25 (100.0)	-----	19 (76.0)	6 (24.0)	25 (100.0)	.00
3	Gift to relatives.	8 (32.0)	11 (44.0)	6 (24.0)	25 (100.0)	2 (8.0)	13 (52.0)	10 (40.0)	25 (100.0)	.092
4	Staying with parent.	25 (100.0)	-----	-----	25 (100.0)	22 (88.0)	3 (12.0)	---	25 (100.0)	.104
5	Health	9 (36.0)	16 (64.0)	----	25 (100.0)	6 (24.0)	17 (64.0)	2 (8.0)	25 (100.0)	.268
6	Property	9 (36.0)	16 (64.0)	-----	25 (100.0)	6 (24.0)	15 (60.0)	4 (16.0)	25 (100.0)	.099
7	Savings	16 (64.0)	9 (36.0)	-----	25 (100.0)	6 (24.0)	17 (68.0)	2 (8.0)	25 (100.0)	.011
8	Jewellery purchase	3 (12.0)	12 (48.0)	10 (40.0)	25 (100.0)	2 (8.0)	11 (44.0)	12 (48.0)	25 (100.0)	.808
9	Distribution of monthly expenditure on household	5 (20.0)	20 (80.0)	-	25 (100.0)	2 (8.0)	15 (60.0)	8 (32.0)	25 (100.0)	.007

	item										
10	Family recreation	2			25 (100.0)	6 (24.0)	15 (60.0)	4 (16.0)	25 (100.0)		.522
11	Choice of political party	10 (40.0)	4 (16.00)	11 (44.0)	25 (100.0)	4 (16.0)	2 (8.0)	19 (76.0)	25 (100.0)		.068
12	Choice of vote caste.	10 (40.0)	6 (24.0)	9 (36.0)	25 (100.0)	4 (16.0)	4 (16.0)	17 (68.0)	25 (100.0)	5. 4 3 3	.066