

WOMEN- DECISION MAKING AND EMPOWERMENT: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY IN SOLAN DISTRICT, HIMACHAL PRADESH

Bristy Kalita¹, Jagriti Mehta², Kiran Jyoti Kaur³, and A.K. Sinha⁴

Abstract: Women empowerment is essential for role of women in decision-making at household and community level as the patriarchal structure of our society has led to gender inequalities, with females being deprived of their rights and autonomy to have a say regarding their development and decisions related to their families. The objectives of this paper are to examine the decision-making role of village women and the extent to which it is affected by their socio-economic status. The study was carried out in the field area by using purposive sampling method. It is based on primary data collected from the females of each household, regarding various parameters of socio-economic status and decision-making role, through non-participant observation, schedule and interviews. The decisions regarding minor economic matters, like daily family expenses are taken by the women themselves. 51 percent of females are employed of which 59 percent contribute to half of the family's income. 91 percent of females do not have ownership rights. The women have high decision-making role at household but not at the village level. Factors like education, age, marital status, ownership rights, and contribution to the household economy have impacts on their decision-making power.

Keywords: Decision-making, Education, Gender Equality, Rural Women, Socio-Economic Status, Women Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

In this present era, we often come across or use terms like- women empowerment, women power, gender equality and many such. It is important to mention it here that the participation of women is crucial as it contributes towards the development of any country. Women empowerment in simple words means the process by which women gain freedom and power to do what they want.

The discussion on women empowerment is incomplete without including the issue of women autonomy. According to Dyson and Moore (1983), autonomy is the ability to gather information and make decisions about one's own life and matters. There are limitations regarding the issues of physical, economic, social and political autonomy concerning women. This can affect the decision-making process of women. Developmental programmes can be more effective when the status of the women is taken into consideration and steps are taken to improve the capability of the women in the decision-making process.

1. Bristy Kalita; M.Sc.; Department of Anthropology, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India; E-mail: bristy.kalita123@gmail.com (Corresponding Author); 2. Jagriti Mehta; Research Scholar (UGC-SRF), Department of Anthropology, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India; E-mail: jagriti7@gmail.com; 3. Kiran Jyoti Kaur; Research Scholar (UGC-SRF), Department of Anthropology, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India; E-mail: minhas.kiran555@gmail.com; 4. A.K. Sinha; Professor, Department of Anthropology, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India; E-mail: ksinha_anil@yahoo.com

Autonomy ensures that women have more control over their own lives and the decisions which affect them and their families. Education and then employment have a positive impact on the lives of the women and provide greater autonomy as compared to those who do not have access to education and employment. Autonomy can thus, be a means to boost the status of women to develop themselves and their families. As the structure of our society is patriarchal there is a difference between the autonomy provided to the males and the females of the society. We can observe the presence of women autonomy to some extent by observing their decision-making power within their households and the society.

According to Upadhyay (2010), in context of the Indian scenario, women empowerment depends on many factors: i. Geographical location: Whether the women live in rural or urban areas. ii. Educational status: Whether the women are literate or not; if literate, then her educational qualification; if not, then the reasons behind it, etc. iii. Social status: The caste and class to which they belong. iv. Age.

In theory, there are various policies at different levels and in different sectors to ensure women empowerment- national, state, and local level; in health, education, economic opportunities, and political participation and in gender-based violence. But in reality, there is a huge gap between policy advancement and its actual practice in different communities. One of the major reasons behind this is the patriarchal structure of most of the communities in India which mostly ignores the aspects affecting women. This then leads to girls and women having restricted access to different sectors such as education, health, decision-making in the household or in the community, and the list goes on. This patriarchal structure exists regardless of the nature of an area- urban or rural. But its impact is higher in the rural areas. So, there is much less women empowerment in the rural areas when compared to the urban areas. Coming to the rural women as compared to the urban women, they face higher rates of gender inequality. Urban women, especially the educated ones, also have better chances at economic opportunities, health and education, and experience domestic violence at a lesser rate. Women in general, who have at least some level of education, have higher decision-making power in the household and the community (Upadhyay, 2010).

The concept of empowerment flows from the concept of power. It is about vesting power where it does not exist or exist inadequately. Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have positive self-esteem so that they can face any obstacle in their lives and they should be able to participate actively in developmental activities. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision-making. One cannot ignore the contribution of women to the society. They constitute almost half of the total population of the world- around 496 million as against a total population of 1027 million. According to the world scenario, 60 percent of the working hours in the world go to the share of women and makeup 30 percent of the official labour

force. This means that 50 percent share of the world's economy is contributed by them (Hazarika, 2011).

Namdeo (2017) was of opinion that women get better recognition in society when they are able to participate equally in the decision-making process and can express their views. Women earn attention from everyone through the power of expression and the ability to solve problems with their views and ideas. Financial independence and better employment opportunities make a woman capable to use her voice in the family and the community too.

Joni and Ann (1986) opined that science and technology have progressed tremendously in certain areas like education, transport, communication, mass media like newspapers, radio, films, etc. This has resulted in lifestyle changes for both men and women all over the world; the impacts are much more evident in urban areas than in rural areas. The status of women- role, position and function are gradually improving toward rationality and more liberty. The age at marriage has been slowly rising. There is a spread of education among women and there is a growth in the desire for participation in economic and social work. It is accepted universally that high female literacy rates have a positive impact on their health, and other issues related to them. It increases income and improves the level and magnitude of women's participation in different projects of development.

The importance of empowerment lies in the choices, roles and responsibilities which are handled by women. It is very crucial to understand the choice of a woman and also her responsibilities towards her family and society. To understand this one has to begin with the study of the prevailing socio-economic structure of the households. Women are the ones who manage all the household activities but have little to no autonomy in most cases when it comes to the sphere of decision-making. This is because they have negligible freedom living under the control of first their fathers, then their husbands, and finally their sons (Chatterjee, 1990; Desai, 1994; Horowitz and Kishwar, 1985).

According to Bano (2014), there are divisions of roles and responsibilities in a society that shape the identities of men and women. But most norms and ideologies of the society are in favour of men. Symbolic modes as expressed in religion and ritual often control gender inequalities which then become powerful modes to retain the status quo. Men control the sphere of women's lives in the way of grandfather, father, father-in-law, husband, son and grandson. This social notion of the pattern of work reflects the biased gender inequalities where men have all the power and women have been exploited by them. There is a great deal of variation in the degree of socio-economic development among the different regions in India. Therefore, there is no feasibility in developing a single model for women empowerment for all the women in the country. Strategies like the incorporation of gender issues in the syllabus of schools, identification of targets in accordance to micro-level regional analysis, campaigns for spreading awareness, etc. should be region specific.

The prevailing topographical and geographical conditions in the hill states are different from the other regions and thus, the status of women is different too. Women are involved actively in physical activities more and work outside the home- in the fields, orchards, animal rearing, etc. Many women also hold jobs in government as well as in the private sector. Apart from these, their role in the rural development schemes (like MNREGA) has become important in the spheres of decision-making, planning and execution of such schemes. This has occurred after an increase in 50 percent reservation to women under PRIs (Sanghaik, 2014).

According to Mendhapurkar (2003), in the present scenario, the economy of Himachal Pradesh mainly is based on- agriculture, forestry and horticulture. Access to land, especially for activities related to horticulture like apple orchards- makes the people benefit from capitalist development. Agriculture in this hill state is labour intensive rather than capital intensive. The social structure has witnessed some changes due to the development and success of horticulture, mainly in the districts of Shimla, Kullu, Kinnaur, Mandi, Lahaul Spiti and Chamba. In some districts, the lifestyle of the people has faced more modernisation or westernisation due to the accelerated process of class formation. The use of the forest transitioned from collective to individual and this has changed rural life in Himachal Pradesh. Social forestry programmes were established in India to protect the forests and improve the living conditions of the people living in poverty. But they have, in reality, destroyed the natural environment and increased the burden of work on the poor, rural women.

This ecological crisis has affected gender relations as well. Men migrate from rural areas to towns or cities to find work. This places the whole responsibility of the household on women. Women are more connected to the environment and use nature to meet their subsistence needs for the household. Men, on the other hand, are more driven towards income-generating economy and support cash crops at the expense of the indigenous forests. But men are not paid a lot for their labour in the plantations. This results in a worse situation for the women- they no longer have their means of subsistence and above that, they are not given money to fulfil their needs. The capitalist transformation shapes the lives of the rural women in Himachal Pradesh.

Hill women have extremely busy lives from early morning to late in the evening and in times even till late night. They work in the agricultural fields alongside the men and also play their household roles. They constantly work in the fields- break the earth, weed, reap, pound or carry heavy loads of fodder, firewood, manure, water, etc., and during the season of building when the terrace walls and terrace fields are built by men, they break earth-clods down, participate in the excavation of stones and carry them. Mendhapurkar (2003) describes the experiences of the Himachal as the insensitivity of the developmental programmes towards the needs of the poor, the women in the hilly areas who live in poverty. The design of the programmes is so made as to cater to the needs of the funding or implementing agencies who

want results. This aim to fulfil the requirement of such agencies pushes the needs of the poor and the exploited sections of the society away and further into poverty.

Most of the works of the small terraced fields are looked after by the women. The men are responsible for ploughing and even now, it is considered as an act of shame to have a woman plough. They are allowed to do so only in cases of emergency. Other works like sowing, weeding, watering, and all the rest till the processing of the grains are mostly done by the women. The women firstly do the household chores and then are usually away for the rest of the day collecting fodder, grass, leaves, firewood and tending to animals in the forests.

During the season of harvest, the women very often work in the fields even after meals past midnight. They not only carry the produce to their homes but also spread it to dry on the rooftops or the yard to protect it from decomposing sooner. In horticulture, they are responsible for pruning, plucking, grading and packing of apples. They are also responsible for other tasks- animal rearing, milking the cows and buffaloes, preparation of buttermilk, butter and then ghee. They collect the cattle dung, dump it and later carry it to the fields to use it as organic manure. In the rural areas of the hilly regions, women are equally the bread earner alongside the men. Women participate in almost all the rural occupations in these regions. They play a significant role in agricultural operations and household activities are considered solely as the responsibility of the women. The participation of women in both household and non-household activities is higher as compared to males in the hilly regions (Mendhapurkar, 2003).

According to Bano (2014), there are certain indicators of women empowerment which include

i. Education ; ii. Educational freedom; iii. Economic contribution iv. Economic freedom; v. Decision-making and household management; vi. Perceived status within the household vii. Health

According to Arora (2017), enrolling girls in primary education and their survival and transition to higher classes lead to achieving gender parity in education. According to the Institute of Statistics (UNESCO), the Gender Parity Index (GPI) is the ratio of the number of female students enrolled at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education to the corresponding number of male students in each level. According to UNESCO, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is the number of pupils enrolled in a given level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the theoretical age group for the same level of education. GPI of GER is the ratio of GER of the girls to that of boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Thus, the GPI (GER), which is free from the effects of the population structure of the appropriate age groups, for each level of education, is taken as the appropriate indicator to monitor gender equality in education.

According to UNESCO, the youth literacy rate has increased from 61.9% to

86.1% during the period 1991-2011. This period saw a higher increase in literacy rate among female youths (from 49.3% to 81.8%) compared to male youths (from 73.5% to 90%). Over the years, the gap between male and female youth literacy rates has been reduced considerably. As per Census 2011, the ratio of female youth literacy rate to male youth literacy rate is 0.91 at all India level. During the decade 1991-2001, the percentage increase in ratio of female youth literacy rate to male youth literacy rate is 19.4% whereas, during 2001 -2011, the growth was 13.75%. The slow pace of progress in the indicator 'ratio of female youth literacy rate to male youth literacy rate' in the last decade can be attributed to the tendency of low growth rates observed for most of the indicators which are nearing the saturation point (Arora, 2017).

Women play a crucial role in the socio-economic context of society. The development of the nation can hardly be achieved without proper development and empowerment of women. Gender disparities are seen in every society and the social and cultural norms validate the status of women in society. Culture is transferred from one generation to another and the gender role as well. Therefore, it is important to know and identify the factors that determine the status of women in society and their role in women empowerment.

METHODOLOGY

Research is a systematized body of knowledge. The reliability and validity of research findings depend upon the methodological framework employed.

The main objectives of the study were:

Firstly, to examine the decision-making role of village women.

Secondly, to explore the extent to which the decision-making role of village women is affected by their socio-economic status.

The present study was carried out in Nauni, Shamror, Dhako and Thana Panda villages of Solan district. Nauni is a small village in Kunihar Tehsil in Solan District of Himachal Pradesh State, India which is located 38km from Solan, the district headquarters. It comes under the administration of Nauni Panchayat. Shamror is a medium size village located in Solan Tehsil of Solan district which is 14km away from Solan. It belongs to Shamrod Panchayat. Dhako is a village in Solan Tehsil under the administration of Dhako Panchayat. It is located 5km from Solan. Thana Panda is also a village in Solan Tehsil which comes under Thana Panda Panchayat. It is located 20km towards North of Solan. 80 out of 170 households were covered from these villages (42, 28, 7 and 3 households from Nauni, Shamror, Dhako and Thana Panda respectively).

The study was both quantitative and qualitative in nature, conducted in the month of October 2019, and was based on primary data collected from each alternate household. As the study deals with women decision-making and empowerment, the

households with the availability of female respondents aged above 18 years were selected using purposive sampling method. The data relating to various parameters of socio-economic status and decision-making role were collected through non-participant observation, schedule and interviews.

All the authors contributed at all the stages, i.e., from fieldwork to the final stage of this manuscript, though the interviews were taken by the first author.

The primary data comprised of assets holding and ownership rights (land holding, productive and non-productive assets), income patterns, expenditure patterns, social participation, and women autonomy.

As the study was concerned with women, the researchers selected adult female informants of different age and marital groups for the purpose. The following indices relating to various variables were computed:

a) Decision-making index-The decision-making role of village women has been studied under two categories: decision-making role at household level and decision-making at the women level.

b) Scoring-

Decision by respondent if always	1
Decision by respondent if most frequent	0.75
Decision by respondent if sometimes	0.50
Decision by respondent if rarely	0.25
Decision taken along with husband	0.5
Decision taken by others	0

By summing up all values, a composite index was constructed. Composite index is an important statistical tool that groups together similar equities to create a representation of overall parameter for an efficient data presentation.

Number of statements = 90

Calculated values:

Maximum value = 90

Minimum value = 0

Range = 0-90

Calculated range 0-9

Composite index:

LOW	0-3
MEDIUM	>3, >=6
HIGH	>6, >=9

Low, Medium, High based on Bell's curve.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Decision Making Role of Village Women

The role that a woman plays in the decision-making process in the day-to-day lives- in the social as well as in the economic spheres is very crucial. Mostly in all the patriarchal societies, the women have less say in decisions regarding anything. But the voices of women need to be heard for the overall development of society and the country as well. This study is based on their decision-making power, to examine to which extent women empowerment exists in the economic and at the women level too.

(A) Economic Decision

Results show that decisions regarding minor economic matters, like- daily family expenses, personal needs, etc. are taken by the women themselves. These findings are similar to that of Sethi (1998). The major financial decisions, like- savings, investment, etc. are taken mostly by mutual consent of the family members; although, there is dominance of the males in the decision-making, regarding major economic aspects of their lives. This finding is similar to the findings of Das and Lenna (1993) who concluded that husband and wife jointly decided major financial matters. However, this does not conform with the results of Bala and Monga (2004) who stated that in their result that women play passive role in the decisions of financial matters.

If we compare the males of Nauni, Shamror, Dhako, and Thana Panda villages, males of Thana Panda village are more dominant than in the other three villages. This may be because the females of this particular village do not have a permanent source of income and also, they are not much educated.

Table 1 shows the percentage distribution of women regarding decision-making in relation to economic aspects in all the four villages.

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN REGARDING DECISION-MAKING IN RELATION TO ECONOMIC ASPECTS

	Nauni	Shamror	Dhako	Thana Panda
DAILY EXPENDITURE				
Females	86	65	81	49
Males	6	11	2	36
Both	8	24	17	15
INVESTMENT				
Females	26	37	29	11
Males	40	32	34	69
Both	34	31	37	20

SAVINGS				
Females	28	24	22	14
Males	38	42	44	60
Both	34	34	34	26
BORROWING				
Females	20	18	17	10
Males	50	55	55	60
Both	30	27	28	30

Source: Based on fieldwork data

(B) *Decision Regarding Social Aspects*

Results show that females have a lot of independence when it comes to decisions regarding social aspects. They usually take decisions regarding visiting relatives. But when comes to decisions regarding children's education, both the parents come into the decision-making role. The result is almost uniform in all the four villages, i.e., the entire study area. The village society gives a lot of autonomy to women in family-related matters and thus, the results conform to the hypothesis. These findings are similar to the findings of other studies (Soni and Jindal, 1983 and Bala and Monga, 2004). This shows that females in the study area are not ignored in the decision-making related to social issues. The females take independent decisions when it comes to visiting friends and relatives, daily cooking, etc. whereas joint decisions are taken for children's education, treatment of sick family member, etc.

Table 2 shows the percentage distribution of women regarding decision-making in relation to social aspects in all the four villages.

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN REGARDING DECISION MAKING IN RELATION TO SOCIAL ASPECTS

	Nauni	Shamror	Dhako	Thana Panda
CHILDREN'S EDUCATION				
Females	15	20	18	23
Males	26	32	37	32
Both	59	48	45	45
TREATMENT FOR SICK				
Females	19	26	28	11
Males	27	32	32	40
Both	54	42	40	49
VISITING RELATIVES				
Females	77	70	73	65

Males	9	13	16	20
Both	14	17	11	15
DAILY COOKING				
Females	75	64	70	65
Males	11	17	13	25
Both	14	19	17	10

Source: Based on fieldwork data

The findings show that the aggregate decision-making at the household level (economic and social decision) is very high among village women. The following figures show that about 60 percent have high, 22.9 percent fall in the range of medium and only 17.1 percent have a low range of autonomy at general home affairs.

(C) Decision Regarding Participation in Institutions At Village Level

The autonomy of women at the village level is very low. The villages have many formal and informal institutions like Self Help Groups (SHG), Mahila Mandal Committee and Village Panchayat. But most of the village women are either not an active member of such groups or institutions, or they do not have the proper knowledge about these. There are very few women who take interest in such institutions or who have the details regarding the same.

This is not similar to the findings of Bingeman (2001), who noted that the women participation in the region of Manali, Himachal Pradesh, in 'mahila mandals' is high and these provide a forum for decision-making in which women are willing to participate and also provide a mechanism for women's contributions to forest management.

Even though their autonomy is low when it comes to participation in the above-mentioned village institutions, but they mostly practice their voting rights. Results show that around 67.5 percent of the sample population cast their vote according to their own will, whereas 32.5 percent cast their vote by mutually deciding with the other adults of the family.

Table 3 shows the percentage distribution of women by voting decision in all the four villages.

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF WOMEN BY VOTING DECISION

VOTING DECISION	Nauni	Shamror	Dhako	Thana Panda
Females	64.28	78.56	57.14	33.33
Mutually with the help of adults in family	35.72	21.43	42.84	66.67

Source: Based on fieldwork data

Most women do not attend village meetings and very few are part of any such

association. Those engaged also passive participants, with no opinion or with no option to have any say in important matters. This happens because most women are engaged in household work while another reason is also unawareness. This is similar to the findings of Pesses (2015), who concluded that international women rights have led to an increase in women's participation in women development but have not promoted women's role in women development in decision-making process.

Only 29 percent of them are member of SHGs. They were made aware of such groups by other village women and their friends, but most such groups are not functional. They mostly know about the groups which provide loans to the villagers. They play a passive role and only 9 percent of them give suggestions, or objects, or take part in decision-making in these groups. Rest of the women who attend various meetings of these groups do not play an active role.

By comparing the four villages, results show that 83 percent of the female population of Nauni is members of groups for women, in comparison to 36 percent from Shamror, 31 percent from Dhako and 11 percent from Thana Panda villages. This difference may be attributed to the proximity of the village Nauni to Nauni proper town.

The Relationship between Socio-Economic Status and Decision Making among Women

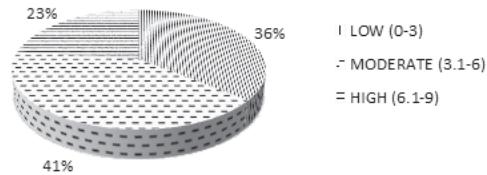
The status of women in every society is determined by many factors which are closely related to each other. These socio-economic factors determine the status of women and hence, also determine women empowerment. Thus, the following section shows the autonomy of the village women in accordance with these various socio-economic factors.

(A) Education

Education is important, not only for employment but also to have knowledge and to understand the need to be aware of our surroundings and opportunities in life. It helps in generating awareness, making an individual well informed about the changes going around in all the places, making a person less ignorant, enabling a person to think logically and make effective decisions. Education is a key factor in determining the autonomy of women in society.

The results show that the literacy rate of the study area as a whole is average, as around 46 percent of the female population of the whole area of study is literate. 54 percent of the village women are illiterate, 19 percent have completed high school studies, 11 percent are matriculates, 7 percent are pursuing higher education after matriculation, 6 percent are graduates and 3 percent are postgraduates.

Figure 1 shows the percentage distribution of the decision-making power among the literate women by taking the aggregate of all the four villages.

Figure 1: Decision Making Power among Literate Women

[Source: Based on fieldwork data]

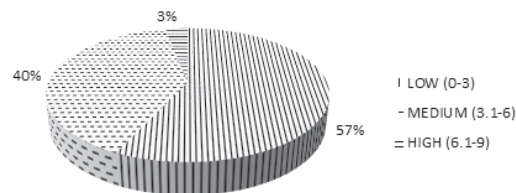
Among all the four villages, the literacy rate among the Shamror women is quite high. 63 percent of them have completed their education till the high school level. 6 percent of them are pursuing higher studies after high school and matriculation, 5 percent are graduates and 4 percent are postgraduates. 22 percent of the village women are illiterate.

The village women of Shamror are conscious of the changes going on in their society as well as the other important matters. They play a major role in taking various decisions at their household and women's level.

Around 66 percent of women in Nauri, Dhako and Thana Panda villages are illiterates. But they play a considerable role in the minor decision-making process in their households. This may be due to their cultural values but the major decisions in these villages are majorly taken by the males.

Due to illiteracy and lack of awareness, the autonomy level of village women, in case of women participation is low. This is similar to the findings of Asiedu et. al. (2018), who noted the descriptive roles of women and recommended strengthening and advancing women political inclusion through education for aspiring women into politics and governance.

Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution of decision-making power among the illiterates by taking the aggregate of the women of all the four villages.

Figure 2: Decision-Making Power among non-literates

Source: Based on fieldwork data

The literate as well as the illiterate village women, have a very positive attitude towards education for girls. They have the desire and want to make their daughters and granddaughters highly educated. The main reasons behind the illiteracy rate

are marriage at an early age and poverty.

(B) *Employment*

By analysing the nature of employment among the village women, one can understand the economic liberty that they have or do not have. Women who are self-independent, financially or economically, have the power to decide on matters on their own. The family and the society, both, respect their opinions and pay interest in their outlook.

Results show that only 51 percent of the sample population are employed, out of which 60 percent of them are engaged in agricultural activities, 12.5 percent are 'anganvari' workers, 12 percent are self-employed, 2 percent are health workers in the Nauli Dispensary and 13.5 percent are daily wage labourers.

Self-employment includes all those selling products in their small shops, tailoring, etc. as well as those working as SHGs. The illiterates are engaged mostly in selling traditional homemade products, agricultural labourers as well as daily wage labourers.

Table 4 shows the employment/occupation distribution among the women of all the four villages.

TABLE 4: PERCENTAGE EMPLOYMENT/OCCUPATION DISTRIBUTION IN DIFFERENT VILLAGES

OCCUPATION	Nauli	Shamror	Dhako	Thana Panda
AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES	68	40	63	76
ANGANVARI	7	14	19	6
SELF-EMPLOYED	9	37	3	7
DISPENSARY	2	0	0	0
DAILY WAGE LABOURER	14	9	15	11

[Source: Based on fieldwork data]

The work of most of the employed women are characterised by long working hours and high physical labour. Their employment has positive impact on their decision-making autonomy. This is partially not similar to the findings of Thakur and Thakur (1995), who had conducted a study in district Mandi, Himachal Pradesh. They studied relationship between female work participation rates and their decision-making power and concluded that by becoming economically independent the status of women is not elevated.

The main reasons behind the unemployment are lack of job opportunities near their place of residence and also, personal factors that influence unemployment.

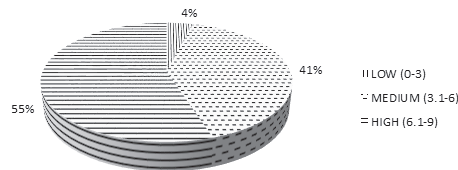
(C) *Income*

Women's share in household income shows that it is a very crucial factor that affects the decision-making role of women. The impact of income on women's autonomy

could be observed and noted effectively in the given area of the study. Income, in this study, is calculated based on payments made for employment, the house rent, allowances, pension, etc. Even though only 51 percent of the females are employed, 59 percent of the working females contribute to half of the family's income.

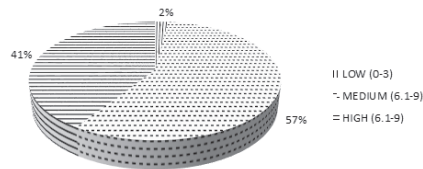
Figure 3 shows the percentage distribution of women as an aggregate of all the four villages regarding the decision-making power among the income groups of females. Figure 4 shows the percentage distribution of women as an aggregate of all the four villages regarding the decision-making power among the non-income groups of females.

Figure 3: Decision-Making Power among Income Groups of Females



[Source: Based on fieldwork data]

Figure 4: Decision-Making Power among Non-Income Groups of Females



[Source: Based on fieldwork data]

Results show that the income groups have more autonomy in comparison to the non-income groups. This is not similar to the findings of Thakur and Thakur (1995).

But this is similar to the findings of Acharya and Bennett (1983), who stated that that women's participation in the market economy increases their status (defined in terms of household decision making), while confinement to non-market subsistence production and domestic work reduces their status.

(D) *Ownership*

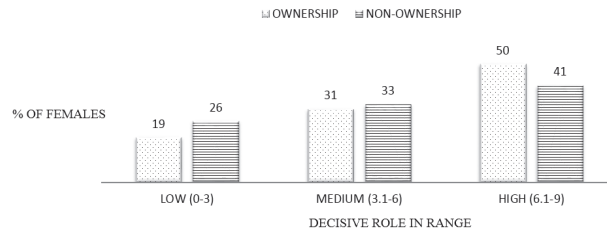
Results show that about 91 percent of the females do not have any ownership rights. The ownership right is restricted to having personal bank accounts. 9 percent have their own bank accounts, handled by themselves. In the sample population, there was no occurrence of a joint bank account.

With respect to ownership and autonomy, and non-ownership and autonomy, the difference between both these relationships is less. Females with ownership

rights lead slightly better lives than the ones who do not have any such right.

Figure 5 shows the relationship between ownership and decision-making among the women in all the four villages.

Figure 5: Relationship between Ownership and Decision-Making



[Source: Based on fieldwork data]

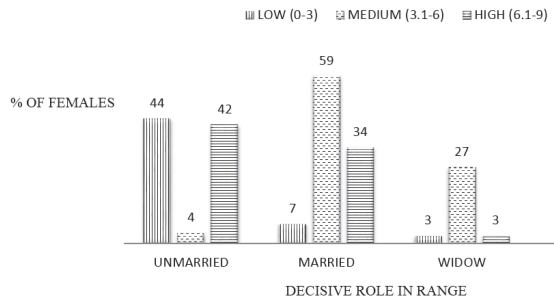
(E) Marital Status and Age

Marital status shows whether a person is married, unmarried or a widow and this is an important factor that determines the level of autonomy among females. The widows, whose husbands were the only source of household income, have taken up the responsibility of the entire household upon themselves.

In the area of study, the widows have more decisive powers in comparison to others. Unmarried females have high decision-making power or role in comparison to married women. Married females have to take decisions according to their husbands and in-laws. Thus, it is similar to the findings of Thakur and Thakur (1995), who stated that the authority of taking decisions remain under the domain of elders who may be the husband or parents-in-law in the family irrespective of the fact whether the family is joint or nuclear and the family is economically independent or not.

Figure 6 shows the relationship between marital status and decision-making among the women in all the four villages.

Figure 6: Marital Status and Decision-Making Power



Source: Based on fieldwork data

The age distribution shows that decision-making power increases with the increase in age. It is high in the age group 48-57. In this age group, the women are completely mature and their decision-making is the most effective.

Table 5 shows the percentage distribution of women regarding their final decision-making power in all the four villages among different age groups.

TABLE 5: PERCENTAGE OF FEMALES IN FINAL DECISION-MAKING POWER

AGE GROUP	LOW (0-3)	MEDIUM (3.1-6)	HIGH (6.1-9)
18-27 years	10	48	42
28-37 years	4	51	45
38-47 years	19	33	48
48-57 years	2	43	55
58-ABOVE years	3	45	52

[Source: Based on fieldwork data]

Among the age group of 48-57 years, majority of females (55%) were found to have high decision-making power followed by 52% and 48% in the age group 58-above years and 38-47 years respectively. 19% females having low decision-making power were among the age group of 38-47 years followed by 10 % in the age group of 18-27 years and lowest number of females (2%) among the age group 48-57 years. In case of medium decision-making power, highest number of the females (51%) belonged to the age group of 28-37 years and minimum (33%) to the age group of 38-47 years.

CONCLUSION

Discussions regarding women empowerment have been making rounds around the world for quite some time now. Recently this talk has gained more importance because even though modernisation has hit most of the human population, the terms such as 'gender inequality', 'discrimination based on gender', etc. have not vanished as of yet. Many people claim that patriarchy does not affect the lives of the female members of society and some even go further to state that there is equality among all. This may be true but not for all, and not completely.

Women empowerment is not about giving more power to women; it is about giving them equal rights to live their lives on their terms. Many factors affect the way women are treated- caste, class, geographical background, age, etc. While education brings a positive change among women, it is not always the case. Education is not even guaranteed to all women, and if granted, it does not come with a certificate to make own decisions. There are many other factors that affects the decision-making power of the women in society.

Results of the study reflect the economic status and livelihood among the people from the area of the study. The study area as a whole is not completely

economically backward. A decent part of the population has access to safe drinking water, sanitation, electricity and proper 'pucca' houses. But the other part of the population struggles for these basic amenities. Out of all the four villages, each one has their better-off as well as economically backward section of the society. So, it can be concluded that both economically well off as well as economically backward people make up the population of the selected area of study. There is no economic homogeneity.

The women of the study area have a high decision-making role in their households, mostly in matters like- daily household expenditure, decisions pertaining to visiting friends and relatives, treatment of sick family members, etc. The women mostly have equal say along with their male counterparts, when it comes to children's education. The findings show that the village society provides autonomy to the women of the village, as a part of their tradition and culture.

But the village women are not active participants in decision-making when it comes to decision-making at women level in the village. Most women are not members of any women organisation of the village. They mostly do not attend meetings held in the village. When they attend the Panchayat meetings, they are passive participants, without any opinion or suggestions. From this it can be said that the decision-making is not strong in such issues among the women because their opinions are mostly neglected and they are kept busy in their household affairs only. Some women are unaware of the presence of 'mahila mandal' in the village, and out of those who are aware, only a few are members of such women organisations. The women are more confined in household activities and do not consider it necessary to be a part of such committees or meetings. This again shows that the females are conditioned from their childhood in a way that they mostly believe that they need to be aware of the situations and necessities inside their house only and should focus on their families. Women who have a different opinion are mostly not encouraged by their families.

Voting rights are important for every section of the country. The majority of the women utilise it and cast their votes on their own. Those who do not understand or are aware of the political scenario cast their vote after discussing it with their husbands. It indicates that most women are aware of some of their rights, and in some cases even take interest in knowing what is best for their society by discussing with their husbands and families.

The literacy rate of the females is average in the area of study as a whole. But women are interested in sending their girls to school and for higher education even if they were deprived of such opportunities. They believe that education can provide better lives to the girls and empower them with knowledge and decision-making power.

Results show that being educated improves the status of women and they get

more power to put forward their opinion in the household. So, education does affect the condition of women and can, in the long run, make them more powerful. Most women do not have any ownership rights and those who do mostly own land and a bank account of their own. Results show that those who have ownership rights have moderately better decision-making power than those who do not hold such rights.

Employment and income among the women play a major role in their decision-making rights. Women who are employed and contribute to the income of the household have a better position than those who do not. Therefore, it is clear that financial independence is an important aspect that promotes independent decision-making by the women. Marital status does affect the decision-making power among women. The unmarried and the widowed in the society have higher decision-making power, but this is low among married women. This shows that marriage does play a role in women's lives and even today, married women's decision-making is influenced by their husbands.

Acknowledgements: The authors of this paper are grateful to the respondents and the Centre for Advanced Studies in Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, Panjab University, Chandigarh for arranging the fieldwork to conduct the study. Without this initiative, the study would not have been possible.

References

- Acharya, M. and Bennett, L. (1983). Women and the Subsistence Sector Economic Participation and Household Decision Making in Nepal. *World Bank Staff Working Papers* 526: 34-44.
- Arora, H. (2017). Women Empowerment in India: Gender Equality, linkage between Women empowerment and economic development, Indicators of Women Empowerment. *Civils daily*. Accessed from: <https://www.civildaily.com/women-empowerment-in-india-gender-equality-linkage-between-women-empowerment-and-economic-development-indicators-of-women-empowerment/> [Accessed on 18 May 2020]
- Asiedu, E., Branstette, C., Gaekwad-Babulal, N. and Malokele, N. (2018). The Effect of Women's Representation in Parliament and the Passing of Gender Sensitive Policies. *ASSA Annual Meeting* (Philadelphia, 5-7 January).
- Bala, M. and Monga, O.P. (2004). Impact of Women Employment on Decision Making in Families. *Social Welfare* 51(5): 13-16.
- Bano, S. (2014). Women and Decision Making in Urban India: A Gender Geographical Study of Varanasi City, Uttar Pradesh, India. *The International Journal of Engineering and Science (IJES)* 3(4): 01-11.
- Bingeman, K. (2001). Women's Participation in Forest Management Decisions in the Forest Management Decisions in the Upper Kullu Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India. *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 21(2): 56.
- Chatterjee, M. (1990). Indian Women: Their Health and Economic Productivity. in G. Chowdhry (ed.). *The Journal of Asian Studies* 51(3): 586-588.
- Das, M. and Lenna, S. (1993). Decision Making Practices of Employed and Non-employed Home Makers. *Journal of North-East Council for Social Science Research* 17: 46-78.
- Desai, S. (1994). *Gender Inequalities and Demographic Behavior: India*. New York: The

- Population Council Inc.
- Dyson, T. and Moore, M. (1983). On kinship structure, female autonomy, and demographic behaviour in India. *Population and Development Review* 9(1): 35-60.
- Hazarika, D. (2011). Women Empowerment in India: A Brief Discussion. *International Journal of Educational Planning & Administration* 1(3): 199-202.
- Horowitz, B. and Kishwar, M. (1985). Family Life-The Unequal Deal. in M. Kishwar and R. Vanita (eds.). *in Search of Answers: Indian Women's Voices from Manushi* 26(4): 288. London: Zed Press.
- Joni, S. and Ann, O. (1986). Women in the world- An International Atlas. *Utc.edu*.
[Accessed from: <https://www.utc.edu/faculty/sarla-murgai/women-in-the-world.php> on 16 May 2020]
- Mendhapurkar, S. (2003). From subjects of change to agents of change: a travelogue in Himachal Pradesh. in S. Krishna (ed.). *Livelihood and Gender Equity in Community Resource Management*, pp. 397-411. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Namdeo, P. (2017). Impact of Education on Decision-making Ability of Women. *Educational Quest: An Int. J. of Education and Applied Social Science* 8(Special Issue): 431-434.
- Pesses, A. (2015). Localizing Women's Role in a Globalized World. Paper Presented at *Euroseas Conference*, August 2015, Vienne, Austria. hal-01221557. Accessed from: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01221557/document> [Accessed on 16 May 2020]
- Sanghaik, G. (2014). Women Empowerment in Hill States: A Case Study. *The Indian Journal of Public Administration* 60(3): 527-536.
- Sethi, R.M. (1998). Status and Power of Working Women Within the Family- A Test of Marxisan Perspective. *Journal of Sociological Studies* 8: 97-108.
- Soni, K. and Jindal, B.R. (1983). Effect of Employment of Women on Family Decision Making Pattern. *Journal of Research* 20: 519-524.
- Thakur, S. and Thakur, D. S. (1995). Decision- Making Power: A Micro Level Study in Himachal Pradesh. *Economic Analyst* 16: 01-02.
- UNESCO. Millennium Development Goal Indicators. *United Nations Statistics Division*.
Accessed from: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/Metadata.aspx?IndicatorId=9> [Accessed on 16 May 2020]
- Upadhyay, R. (2010). Women's Empowerment in India-An Analytical Overview. *The Asia Foundation* 01-04.

