

**Education or Earning and Access to Resources
Determining Women's Autonomy: An Experience
Among Women of Manipur**

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Abstract: Women's autonomy is one of the serious concerns of the gender issue. Various studies have shown different dimension and approaches to study the gender issue. One widely accepted input to level the gender difference is the education of women. While some of the pioneer researchers of the field is the access to resources and control over it while a few emphasises on ability to collect information to utilise making own decision and near and dear ones. All these are approach to the same goal or equality between the sexes. The present paper attempts to find out how far education or earning and access to resources given the social set-up have a significant impact on women's decision making power. The study finds that more than 85 percent of women in the sample are literate while 69 percent of them engaged in one or other earning activity. Considering 10 decisions which are commonly taken at the household level either by husband or wife or both it is found that most of the decisions are taken jointly (both husband and wife) while working women take more of independent decisions than the non-working women. Controlling effect of the other background variables work status of women turn out a significant explanatory variable rather education per se.

Introduction

Decision-making power of a woman within the family has been looked upon as one of the important factors which can influence the life of the women herself as well as others (Safilios-Rothschild 1983). A fresh outlook on the emphasis and need for study of women's decision-making power is emphasised by the international conference of population and development (ICPD) Cairo (1994) as a part of improving women's status/empowerment. According to UN (1995) "the empowerment and autonomy of women and improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is highly important end in itself. Improving the status of women also enhances their decision-making capacity at all levels in all spheres of life. The full participation and partnership of both women and men is required in productive and reproductive life, including shared responsibility for the care and nurturing of children and maintenance of the household." Different eminent researchers have attempted to explore the mechanism of decision-making power through different angles. The path breaking work of Blood and Wolfe (1960) gives a direction of decision-making power and area in connection with the resources being possessed by an individual person. Resource includes not only the income of the person but also the

educational attainment and the occupation. It further continues that in a family if a person has more resources he/she will have more power to exercise in making decisions of the family. Resource theory of decision-making has been supported by various other studies as well (Buric and Zecevic 1967; Michel 1967; Saffilios-Rothschild 1967; Lamouse 1969; Lupri 1969; Kendel and Lesser 1971).

Rodman (1972) demonstrated that power is not limited only to resource rather it is also shaped by cultural setting. It needs to understand the setting of the society whether it is strong patriarchal, modified patriarchal or equalitarian and he found that in the strongly patriarchal society husband has more power irrespective of his resources whereas it is not true either in modified patriarchy or equalitarian society.

In the context of gender relationship decision-making power is often treated as one of the basic dimensions. In the ongoing struggle and effort for women's empowerment it has taken over a decisive area in all spheres of life. Since decision-making power is transient, it is difficult to measure perfectly. As Rodman (1972) rightly mentioned a spouse may say that he/she has made the decision but the power is conferred by the other spouse. Indeed it is a methodological issue but it unfolds the completeness of the decision-making power. Although this inherent difficulty prevails in capturing the decision making power of either spouse the present study makes an attempt to capture the same for women.

Decision-making is by and large affected by various factors and among others social setting (Rodman 1972), the level of education (Lamouse 1969), husbands education (Fox 1973), and occupation (Buric and Zecevic 1967; Saffilios-Rothschild 1967, 1969), the place of residence and age (Acharya *et al.* 1983) may be mentioned. Besides social setting, a woman's life cycle plays an important role in the dynamics of decision-making and it is true that when a woman becomes older and she takes over a sexual role, she has more power and control than when she was young (Cain *et al.* 1979; Das Gupta 1996; Vatuk 1998). Jejeebhoy (1995) points out that degree of gender stratification in the society acts to limit or condition the impact of other factors. In extreme patriarchal setting, where the seclusion of women or their withdrawal from outside activities is a high prestige even better educated women may experience less decision-making autonomy than uneducated women of less stratified setting (Jejeebhoy 1995). Dyson and Moore's (1983) work also corroborates that in the less gender stratified society of south India women enjoy more autonomy than her counterpart of the north. The studies of Acharya *et al.* (1981) and Niraula and Morgan (1995) documented that in Nepal the Tebeto-Burman groups were having more decision making power than the Indo Aryan women.

The present work tries to give a focus on the testing of the commonly held hypothesis that education is the main factor which affects the autonomy of the women (Cochran 1979; Jejeebhoy

1994; 1995;) in any social set-up. This is well emphasised in the recent ICPD, Cairo conference (1994). This hypothesis is tested against the widely notion determining the status of women which is based on earning and access to the resources (both material and social resources) (Dixon 1978).

Setting

South-east Asian countries have the characteristics of relatively higher freedom of movement, participation of women in economic activities and egalitarian husband wife decisionmaking authority in household matters (Mi Mi Khaing 1963; Ni Ni Gyi 1963 (Burmese women); Swift 1963 (Malaya women); Subandrio 1963 (Indonesian women). But there still lies the issue of gender based activities in household level and very few women do not enjoy the help from their male counterparts in these activities. Within India also there is a vast dichotomy in women's autonomy between the North and the South India and south Indian women enjoy a higher level of autonomy than her counterpart in the north (Dyson and Moore 1983; Jejeebhoy 1996). This is mainly attributed to the social setting which is more liberal in the South. Culture has a strong affinity to the type of religion followed. However, this notion should not be mercilessly cited. For example majority of the Indonesians are mostly Muslim but there is strong acceptance of family planning and women have a higher level of participation in decisionmaking (see Subandrio 1983). This implies that local laws are stronger than the religious law.

In light of above discussion it is examined to understand the socio-economic dynamics of women's autonomy in Manipur. It is a small hilly state in the northeastern part of India. The people of the state belong to the Mongoloid race. Topographically there is difficulty in physical accessibility while there exists a long history of cultural fusion in the state both from the east (erstwhile Burma) before 17th century and the west (mainstream India) since 17th century. Thus, the state possesses the characteristics of both an egalitarian way of life between the sexes as seen in the South East Asian set-up and Hinduism characterised by a strong patriarchal social relation. However, in earlier studies (Sircar 1984) documents that in the state there is more or less equality of sexes although male has an advantage of authority which is often challenged by women's collective force. Sircar rightly commented "There is an expression of feminism in Meitei patrilineal culture which encourages women to be individually self-reliant and collectively powerful without necessarily involving sex war (1984, p 184)". The Meiteis in Manipur belongs to Tebeto Burman group. She further pointed out that the ethos of sex roles and inter-sex relationships are based on mutual dependence, respect and cooperation. Thus, the society exhibits a more coherence of mutual co-operation between the sexes.

In the sample 85 percent of the women are literate while the non-weaving women are 100 percent but comparatively weaving women are less educated (71 percent). Most of the household have an income of less than Rs. 3000 per month. The average household size is 6 for all.

Majority of women do all the domestic chores. But interestingly almost all of them participate in family matters while more than 90 percent are members in one or other women's organisation. The average age at marriage is 23 years. However, non-weaving women turns out 26. The average age of woman is 37 and working women are slightly older than the non-working women. The average number of children born to them is 3.1. However, non-working and non-weaving women have a lower number of children than the weaving women.

Data and methodology

The present study is based on the information from 643 currently married women who are in reproductive age (20-49). There are three different subgroups of women such as non-working women (200) working women in the organised sector (191) and 252 working women who actively engaged in handloom weaving. Handloom weaving is a gender specific occupation meant only for the women in the state.

Autonomy defined in this study is similar to that defined by Dyson and Moore (1983). It means the ability to collect information and use it to make decision relating to one and the nearest. However, the dimension examined in this study is a relatively small and gives a focus on ability of the women in making decision regarding economic and social aspects.

The power to make decision is highly important from the point of autonomy of the women because it is often argued that women are secluded and their voice is not properly listened. Thus, the rationale behind the whole theme of this study is to examine the involvement of the women in decision making in the economic and social spheres at home. There are ten areas which are examined for women's involvement in decisionmaking. These ten areas can broadly be divided into two parts as economic decision and social decisions. Under economic decisions the present study has included the following: decisions relating to expenditure of small day to day needs (daily family expenses), expenditure on personal needs (personal needs), major financial matters like buying and/or selling of land/TV/fridge/vehicle etc. (major finances), possession and liquidation of ornaments (ornaments) and save and/or borrowing money. Women's involvement in economic decisionmaking is shown in Table 7.1.

Decisions can be taken either by husband, wife or both. If the decision is taken by wife or by both husband and wife, then the woman is involved in decision making.

Table 7.1: Percentage distribution of women in different work status by decisionmaking in economic aspects.

Area of decision	Non-worker	Non-weaver	Weaver	Total
Daily family expenses				
Respondent	16.5	19.4	17.9	17.9
Husband and others	28.5	15.7	13.9	19.0
Both (husband and wife)	55.0	64.9	68.3	63.1
Personal needs				
Respondent	60.5	79.6	69.4	69.7
Husband and others	10.0	1.6	2.0	4.4
Both (husband and wife)	29.5	18.8	28.6	26.0
Major finances				
Respondent	2.0	5.8	3.2	3.6
Husband and others	16.0	8.9	6.0	10.0
Both (husband and wife)	82.0	85.3	90.9	86.5
Ornaments				
Respondent	10.5	36.1	22.2	22.7
Husband and others	15.0	3.7	5.2	7.8
Both (husband and wife)	74.5	60.2	72.6	69.5
To save				
Respondent	50.5	71.7	68.7	63.9
Husband and others	15.5	1.6	6.0	7.6
Both (husband and wife)	34.0	26.7	25.4	28.5
To borrow				
Respondent	40.0	53.4	54.8	49.8
Husband and others	25.0	6.8	9.9	13.7
Both (husband and wife)	35.0	39.8	35.3	36.5
N	200	191	252	643

Table 7.1 shows that in this society women's involvement is very high in all aspects of economic decisions considered here. However, slight variation is noted with respect to the 3 groups of women examined (i) invariably decisions taken alone by the women are the highest among non-weaver working women and lowest for non-working women. (ii) Similarly the proportion of husband and others taking decisions are the highest for non-working women and the lowest for non-weaver working women. (iii) Combined decision making is very high among all the 3 groups, the highest among weavers being in the case of routine and major financial matters, highest among non-weaving women for buying personal needs, ornament related matters and for saving. As for borrowing, husband-wife discussion is the highest for non-weaver working women.

Majority of respondents reported that they could take the decisions to spend on their personal needs (69.7 percent). In decisions of personal needs the involvement of husband and others is the least. A higher proportion of non-weavers (80 percent) who get higher and regular income could make decisions on the expenditure to meet personal needs compared with 69.4 and 60.5 percent of weaver and non-workers respectively. A little more than one-fourth of respondents took the decision in consultation with their husbands. This shows egalitarian decision making. However, it is also found that there is not much difference between the non-workers (29.5 percent) and weavers (28.6 percent) in this respect.

An important aspect of the economic decision making is the decision for the major economic matters. In the literature it is found that women are left out in making economic decisions in the rigid patriarchal system (Cain *et al.* 1979). Even though the Meitei society is patriarchal, in the study area on the contrary, it is found that most of the decisions are taken together by husband and wife. Particularly in the case of major financial decisions 86.5 percent of respondents took decisions with husband. However, 10 percent of the respondents reported that husbands and others took independently and this is higher for the non-workers. Majority of weavers (90.9 percent) felt that in their families the major financial decisions are made jointly with them. This finding suggests that in the study area women are not ignored.

Table 7.1 shows that even though 70 percent of respondents make the decisions either to possess or liquidate their valuable ornaments, in the case of non-workers 15 percent of them reported that such decisions are taken by their husband and others. This is the highest proportion in this aspect. During the fieldwork one respondent flatly told that “males need not poke their nose” into this matter because it is a woman’s business. It is also seen that the non-weavers are most assertive (36.1percent) about deciding on their ornaments and the non-workers the least (10.5 percent).

Decision to save appears to be a domain of the women with 64 percent of them alone deciding whether to save money or not. Even for the non-working group half of them took decisions about saving. This proportion is the highest among non-weaver (71.7 percent) with weavers falling in between (68.7 percent). Husband and other’s involvement is much higher among the non-worker than for the working women.

The concept of borrowing used in this study is borrowing to meet the shortage of money required for day to day maintenance at any given point of time. This variable is basically sought for checking whether the women have the power to meet immediate financial needs at the time of requirement. About half of the respondents said that in their family they can decide about borrowing (Table 7.1). In decisions for borrowing, 53-55 percent of working women have shown independent decision making power to borrow than non-workers (40 percent). Nevertheless, in

slightly more than one-third of the families, this decision is taken by respondent and husband together. Between weaver and non-weaver the difference is only marginal in making independent decision by respondent alone with weavers having an edge over non-weavers. However, total involvement is slightly higher for non-weavers (93 percent) compared to weavers (90 percent).

Involvement in social decisions

Under social decisions are included children's education, treatment for sick child, going to natal kin, and joining *marup*. Table 7.2 shows this information. Note that the child related information is restricted to those who had a surviving child at the time of survey.

In decisions regarding children's education more than two-thirds of the respondents (68.6 percent) reported that they took the decisions along with their husband. Yet 14.6 percent of the total respondents took decision of children's education by themselves. Equally big proportion of respondents (14.7 percent) reported that in their family they were not involved in the decisions regarding their children's education. Among the categories of respondents a higher proportion of non-weavers took independent decision about their children's education than others, whereas among non-workers, a comparatively higher proportion of decision makers were husband and others.

Table 7.2 also shows that 41 percent of the respondents themselves took decisions for seeking treatment for their sick child with a higher proportion among weavers (45.7 percent). In this case, almost 55 percent of non-weavers (which is 10 percentage points higher than that of other two categories of women) took decisions in consultation with their husbands.

Topographically being a small state and the existence of clan exogamy rather than village exogamy among the Meiteis (Hussain 1994), and freedom of mobility, women enjoy a good contact with the natal kin. In the sample it is found that nearly four-fifths of the women themselves took the decisions as to whether to go to their natal place or not.

Joining *marup* is a common phenomenon for the women in the valley area. Once a member, a regular contribution is to be given to *marup*. For joining *marups*, about three-fourths (74.2 percent) of the respondents decided on their own whether to join *marups* or not. However, a comparatively lesser proportion of non-workers are able to decide on their own as to whether to join *marups* or not as compared to the working women. This could be because of the money involved by way of regular contribution. It should be noted that in all the aspects of decisions covered, whether economic or social, a comparatively higher proportion of decisions were taken by husband and others among non-workers.

Table 7.2: Percentage distribution of women in different work status by decision making in social aspects.

Area of decision	Non-worker	Non-weaver	Weaver	Total
Children's education*				
Respondent	12.4	18.4	13.5	14.6
Husband and others	20.1	14.0	15.1	14.7
Both (husband and wife)	67.5	66.5	71.0	68.6
Treatment for sick child*				
Respondent	39.7	36.9	45.7	41.3
Husband and others	14.9	8.4	9.4	10.8
Both (husband and wife)	45.4	54.7	44.9	47.9
Going to natal family				
Respondent	73.0	83.2	80.2	78.8
Husband and others	11.5	2.6	6.7	7.0
Both (husband and wife)	15.5	14.1	13.1	14.2
Joining <i>marup</i>				
Respondent	64.5	78.5	78.6	74.2
Husband and others	9.0	1.0	4.0	4.7
Both (husband and wife)	26.5	20.4	17.5	21.2
N	200	191	252	643
* The total number of women for these two variables are 194, 179, and 245 for non-worker, non-weaver and weaver respectively.				

Index of Decision Making

In order to give a more clear idea of women's involvement in decisionmaking, a composite index is constructed giving women's individual independent decision making a higher weightage. Nevertheless it is equally important to consider the joint decision making with husband in the household.

Taking 6 decisions of in economic aspect and 4 social decisions, a score of 1 is assigned if the respondent made the decision by herself while 0.5 is assigned if she participates in making decision along with husband (both). However, there is an adjustment for 25 women who do not have a child. In order to include them all the score of in social decisions they are multiplied by a factor of 2 since they are deprived of 2 child related decisions. This adjusted figure is used in further analysis.

A composite index was created (DECIND) summing all the values for the ten decisions which ranges from 0 if the respondent does not participate in any decisions and 10 if she takes all the 10 decisions by herself.

DECIND are classified as low, medium and high on the basis of the number of decisions taken by her or in which she is involved. If the index is zero it indicates that she is not taking/not involved in any decision making. If the index is 50 percent or less (0 excluded) of the total number of score it is low, if the index is 51-75 percent it is medium and above 75 percent is treated as high. However, there are only 6 women who do not involve in making decision in all 10 decisions. Thus, they are combined in the low category.

In Table 7.3 it is seen that for DECIND slightly more than one-fourth (19.1 percent) fall in the low group and in this lie a higher proportion of non-workers (31 percent) compared to non-weavers (10.5 percent) and weavers (16.3 percent). The index also shows that more than half of non-weavers (53.4 percent) and weavers (51.2 percent) belong medium as compared to only 48 percent of non-workers. Compared to only one-fifth (21 percent) of non-workers working women have a high decisionmaking score, non-weavers (36.1 percent) and weavers (32.5 percent). This indicates that work participation has an impact on economic decisionmaking power of the woman.

Table 7.3: Percent distribution of respondents by decision index.

Decisionmaking index	Non-worker	Non-weaver	Weaver	Total
Low	31.0	10.5	16.3	19.1
Medium	48.0	53.4	51.2	50.9
High	21.0	36.1	32.5	30.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	200	191	252	643

Based on the indices computed from the decision making areas it is found that, over all, non-worker on an average involve in 6 out of 10 decisions, non-weavers in 7.1 decisions and weavers in 6.9 decisions (Table 7.4).

Table 7.4 gives the average number of decisions taken by women in different categories by selected characteristics. Overall, women in higher age group, those living in nuclear families, those having access to household resources and those belonging to Sanamahi religion make a comparatively larger number of decisions.

Table 7.4 shows that, in general, women who are in the higher age group, with higher age gap, with higher marriage duration, living in nuclear families, having access to household resource, belong to Sanamahi religion make a comparatively larger number of decisions.

Household income *per se* makes a difference in the case of non-workers, where women in lower income group make slightly more decisions. The pattern observed is true for all categories of women.

Table 7.4: Distribution of mean score of decisions among women by characteristics

Background characteristic	Non-worker	Non- weaver	Weaver	Total
Years of schooling of wife				
Illiterate	5.8 (25)	-	7.0 (72)	6.7 (97)
1-6	6.6 (32)	-	7.0 (48)	6.9 (80)
7-9	6.6 (46)	6.3 (4)	7.0 (62)	6.8 (112)
10-14	5.8 (64)	7.2 (36)	6.6 (55)	6.4 (155)
15+	5.3 (33)	7.1 (151)	6.6 (15)	6.8 (199)
Age				
<35	5.7 (120)	6.8 (32)	7.0 (95)	6.3 (247)
35+	6.6 (80)	7.2 (159)	6.8 (157)	6.9 (396)
Interspouse age difference				
<5	5.8 (113)	7.1 (130)	6.7 (146)	6.6 (389)
5+	6.4 (87)	7.2 (61)	7.1 (106)	6.9 (254)
Marital duration				
<5	5.1 (47)	6.7 (31)	6.4 (24)	5.9 (102)
5+	6.3 (153)	7.2 (160)	6.9 (228)	6.8 (541)
Type of family				
Nuclear	6.6 (124)	7.3 (110)	7.0 (181)	6.9 (415)
Other	5.2 (76)	6.9 (81)	6.7 (71)	6.3 (228)
Household income				
<5000	6.1 (156)	7.1 (36)	6.9 (223)	6.6 (415)
5001+	5.6 (44)	7.1 (155)	7.0 (29)	6.8 (228)
Access to household resources				
Yes	6.9 (124)	7.3 (150)	7.3 (203)	7.2 (477)
No	4.5 (76)	6.3 (41)	5.3 (49)	5.2 (166)
Religion				
Hindu	5.8 (169)	7.0 (175)	6.8 (208)	6.6 (552)
Sanamahi	7.1 (31)	8.0 (16)	7.4 (44)	7.4 (91)
Total	6.0 (200)	7.1 (191)	6.9 (252)	6.7 (643)

For non-weavers notable differences are observed only in the case of access to household resources and religion where those belong to Sanamahi religion make more decisions.

Those non-weavers living in nuclear families, older in age and having a longer duration of marital life involve in making larger number of decisions.

Among non-workers those in higher age group 35 or more, higher marital duration, living in nuclear family, having access to the household resources and belong to Sanamahi religion take a higher number of decisions. Larger interspouse age difference more than 5 years and lower household income up to Rs. 5000 take a marginal higher social decisions. Education as such does not have a clear relationship.

Noticeable difference in decision is found among weavers in higher age (more than 35

years) who have access to household resource, following Sanamahi religion. Type of family and household income do not have any difference in decisionmaking. Higher interspouse age difference and higher marital duration have a slightly higher number of decisions.

Determinants of decision making: Multiple regression analysis

The dependent variables are DECIND. The explanatory variables are years of schooling, marital duration, household income, husband-wife age difference, type of family, religion, category of women and access to the household resources. Religion, type of family, category of women and access to the household resource are categorical variables and hence entered as dummy variables. The rest are taken as continuous variables. For the workers the percent share in household income is also entered in the model.

Table 7.5 shows the regression results for DECIND. Marital duration, religion and access to the household resources and category of women such that weavers and non-weaver working women are significantly related to decision making index, DECIND. One important finding in this study is that education does not have a significant impact on decisionmaking dynamics among women of this state. This finding proves the hypothesis that education has a strong relationship between women’s autonomy.

Table 7.5. : Determinant of DECIND, result of multiple regression analysis			
Explanatory variables	B	t	Significance
Education	-0.010	-0.670	0.503
Interspouse age difference	0.021	1.390	0.165
Marital duration	0.020	2.502	0.013
Type of family	0.069	0.521	0.603
Household income	0.000	0.525	0.600
Access to household resources	1.750	12.498	0.000
Religion	0.630	3.795	0.000
Weaver	0.422	2.952	0.003
Non-weaver	0.856	4.611	0.000
Constant	4.516	19.059	0.000

R² =0.322

Conclusion

This study is an attempt towards examining women's autonomy in the context of Manipuri society. The set-up is a mix of both the egalitarian way of life between husband and wife and at same time a manifestation of the Hindu way of life. This arouses the researcher a keen interest in examining the extent of women's participation making decision in daily life at household level. The result shows that among the study population there is strong involvement of women in all the spheres of decisions. Among the variables work status of women (implying income earning), access to the household resources, and religion are notable. However, even though there is strong argument that education augments the independence and avoidance of fatalistic ideas there is no significant effect among this group of women. Perhaps this could be due to the small sample size, the location of the study area, or the social setting itself give a higher level of independence to Meitei women. This calls for deeper insight in the study area.

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