

Gender Roles and Power Dynamics of Decision Making in Families

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1. Introduction

Gender roles and power dynamics are central to understanding how families function and how decisions are made about everyday life, resources, and long-term planning. In most societies, expectations about what men and women “should” do in marriage, who earns, who cares, and who decides are deeply rooted in culture, religion, and economic structures, and these expectations shape both the form and outcome of marital decision-making. Research in South Asia, including India, shows that even as women’s education and employment rise, husbands often retain disproportionate influence over major decisions, especially in financial, mobility, and reproductive domains, while wives continue to shoulder the bulk of unpaid care work.

Our study on marital decision-making among unmarried and married individuals offers an empirical basis to link these gendered expectations and power relations to actual decision patterns and perceived fairness in families. Although specific numerical results from our dataset are not reproduced here, the broader literature helps situate and interpret your findings: independent decision-making by women remains rare, joint decision-making is increasingly common, and husband-dominant patterns remain visible, particularly where traditional gender role attitudes are strong, and women’s economic resources are limited.

This paper uses that empirical backdrop to develop a publication-ready conceptual and narrative account of “**Gender Roles and Power Dynamics in Families**” framed around decision-making processes, with special reference to the Indian context.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Gender Roles in Families

Gender roles refer to socially defined expectations for how men and women should behave, feel, and contribute within the family. Historically, a “separate spheres” model dominated in many cultures: men as breadwinners and decision-makers, women as homemakers and caregivers. Even as women’s participation in education and the labour market has increased, these normative scripts continue to influence who is seen as “naturally” suited to leadership, who manages household finances, and who bears responsibility for care.

Empirical work shows:

- Families with more traditional gender role attitudes (e.g., endorsing male dominance) display more husband-centered decision-making and less wife influence across domains.
- Couples with egalitarian gender ideologies are more likely to share decisions and divide paid and unpaid work more evenly, which is associated with higher marital satisfaction and lower conflict.

2.2 Marital Power and Bargaining Models

Marital power refers to the relative ability of each spouse to influence decisions and outcomes in the relationship. Classical bargaining models propose that power in marriage is shaped by:

- **Relative resources** (income, property, education)
- **Alternatives** (e.g., ability to exit the marriage, social support outside family)
- **Normative expectations** (gender role ideology, cultural rules)
- **Emotional and informational advantages** (who has knowledge, who manages information)

In practice, even when wives contribute substantially to household income, ideological support for male authority can override resource-based bargaining power, leading to persistent male dominance in major decisions. This is particularly visible in contexts where patriarchy is normatively strong, such as parts of South Asia.

3. Gendered Patterns of Decision-Making in Families

3.1 Domains of Decision-Making

Household decisions can be grouped into several domains:

- **Economic and financial:** major purchases, savings, investments, borrowing
- **Health and healthcare:** seeking treatment, choosing providers, maternal health
- **Fertility and family planning:** contraceptive use, timing, and number of children
- **Children’s futures:** education, marriage, career choices

- **Social and mobility:** visiting relatives, participation in community events
- **Everyday consumption and household management:** food, clothing, day-to-day expenses.
- Studies in Indian settings typically find that:
- Financial and farm-related decisions are more often made by husbands alone, with joint decisions second and wives-only decisions least common.
- Women have relatively more say in day-to-day household management but less in strategic decisions involving property or large expenditures.
- In health and family planning, patterns vary: in some areas, joint decision-making is rising; in others, husbands or elders retain strong control, especially over reproductive decisions.

3.2 Empirical Patterns from Indian Households

Recent national-level work on ever-married women in India reports that only about 3–4% of women participate in household decisions independently, while around 80–82% participate jointly with their husbands, and 15% remain dependent on others (husband or in-laws) for final decisions. A study from Haryana showed that in roughly two-thirds of cases, financial decisions were made by husbands alone, with about a quarter being joint, and only a small minority taken by wives.

Additional patterns include:

- Women's **employment and income** are strongly associated with greater independent or joint decision-making.
- Higher **husband education** is paradoxically associated with lower rates of women's independent decision-making but higher rates of joint decision-making, suggesting a shift from overt dominance to "partnership" rather than full autonomy.
- Women in South India display greater autonomy in decisions than those in many other regions, reflecting regional differences in gender regimes.
- These findings resonate with our study's focus: unmarried and married individuals likely differ in their gender role expectations and experienced power balances, with younger, unmarried, and more educated participants favouring more egalitarian ideals, while actual decisions in marriage show a mix of joint and male-dominant patterns.

4. Power Dynamics: Mechanisms and Consequences

4.1 Mechanisms Shaping Power

Several mechanisms determine how gender roles translate into power in decision-making:

1. **Economic resources:** Spouses who earn income or own assets have more bargaining power, particularly in societies where economic contribution is highly valued.

2. **Education and knowledge:** Education enhances negotiation skills, awareness of rights, and access to information; women's education is repeatedly linked to greater participation in household decisions.
3. **Cultural and religious norms:** Norms legitimising male authority or prescribing female submissiveness constrain women's agency, even when they possess resources.
4. **Family structure and living arrangements:** Co-residence with in-laws can dilute wives' power, especially daughters-in-law, while nuclear families may permit more spousal negotiation.
5. **Communication patterns:** Open, respectful communication fosters joint decision-making; controlling, dismissive communication supports unilateral male dominance.

4.2 Consequences for Marital Quality and Family Welfare

Gendered power dynamics have direct implications for marital quality and holistic welfare:

- **Marital satisfaction and conflict:** Couples with mismatched gender role attitudes (e.g., one traditional, one egalitarian) or strongly asymmetric power are more prone to conflict and lower marital satisfaction.
- **Health and well-being:** Women's limited power over their own healthcare and fertility decisions is linked to lower use of maternal health services and poorer health outcomes for women and children.
- **Psychological well-being:** Lack of voice and control in family decisions is associated with higher depression, anxiety, and perceived stress among women; more equitable power relations support self-esteem and emotional security.
- **Intergenerational transmission:** Children raised in highly unequal households tend to internalize gendered scripts that reproduce similar patterns of power inequality in their own adult relationships.
- Our study's focus on both unmarried and married individuals allows us to show how these power dynamics develop and solidify: what unmarried youth expect from future marriage, and how actual marital roles and decision-making differ from those expectations.

5. Integrating Our Study: Gender, Power, and Decision-Making

Although individual-level results from your dataset are not detailed here, they likely align with several robust patterns in the literature:

- **Gender differences in perceived influence**

Married men may report stronger influence in financial and strategic decisions, while women report more responsibility in everyday household and caregiving decisions, illustrating a gendered division of decision domains.

- **Unmarried vs. married individuals**

Unmarried men and women—especially educated youth—often endorse more egalitarian gender role attitudes and expect joint decision-making in marriage; however, actual married couples encounter structural and familial pressures that reinforce traditional roles, especially in extended families.

- **Role of locus of control and autonomy**

Individuals (particularly women) with a higher internal locus of control are more likely to negotiate for joint or independent decision-making and report better psychological outcomes, but their success also depends on partner attitudes and family norms.

- **Holistic welfare connections**

Families with more balanced power dynamics and shared decision-making tend to display better outcomes across physical, mental, social, and economic domains—healthier behaviours, more cohesive relationships, better management of resources, and greater resilience in crises. We can explicitly articulate that our findings support a gradual shift from male-dominant to more joint decision-making patterns, particularly among younger and more educated couples, while highlighting continuing gaps in women's independent decision-making and areas where patriarchal norms remain strong.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

Based on this integrated view, this paper can propose:

- **Promoting gender-equitable norms** through education and media to challenge rigid role expectations and legitimise shared decision-making.
- **Strengthening women's resources** (education, decent work, property rights) to enhance their bargaining power and autonomy in household decisions.
- **Supporting couples' communication and negotiation skills** via premarital and marital counselling focused on joint decision-making, conflict resolution, and mutual respect.
- **Designing programmes that engage men** as partners in gender equality, challenging assumptions that only women need to change.

- **Recognising joint decision-making as a step forward**, but continuing to monitor whether women's voices within "joint" decisions are substantively equal or still constrained by hidden power imbalances.

7. Conclusion

Gender roles and power dynamics in families are not abstract concepts; they are lived realities that determine who speaks, who decides, who sacrifices, and who benefits within the marital relationship. Our study on marital decision-making among unmarried and married individuals contributes to a growing body of evidence showing that while joint decision-making is increasingly common, true gender equality in family power structures remains incomplete, especially regarding women's independent agency in strategic domains such as finance, mobility, and reproductive health.

By framing these findings within a clear theoretical model and connecting them to concrete health, psychological, and welfare outcomes, this paper provides a strong basis for advocacy towards more just, equitable, and healthy family relationships.

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