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The Politics of Everyday Decisions: Women's Agency, Household Power, and Human Rights in Purba Medinipur, West Bengal

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Abstract

Women's household decision-making is a significant site where gender equality, agency, and human rights are negotiated. This qualitative anthropological study examines how education, occupational engagement, economic resources, and kinship arrangements shape married women's autonomy in Haldia and adjoining areas of Purba Medinipur, West Bengal. Twelve purposively selected, semi-structured interviews with women aged 20-50 explored financial management, domestic responsibilities, personal mobility, and reproductive choices. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, including habitus, capital, field, and symbolic violence, informs interpretation; CEDAW provides the human-rights framework. Findings reveal varied, domain-specific agency. Educated and employed participants generally reported stronger involvement in budgeting, savings, career and household decisions, yet these resources did not guarantee equal authority. Women with limited independent resources often managed routine expenditure while husbands or senior male kin controlled major finances. Mobility and reproductive choices also reflected generational hierarchy and gender norms. Other cases showed negotiated autonomy, independent contraceptive decisions, or substantial authority despite limited schooling. Agency was relational and contextual, sometimes accompanied by disproportionate unpaid labour. The study argues that substantive equality requires educational opportunity, financial literacy, control over resources, equitable care work, reproductive-health access, and gender-sensitive community interventions. Comparative, longitudinal ethnography can further illuminate changing household power and women's rights in context.

Keywords: Bourdieu’s Theory of Practices; Women’s Decision-Making Autonomy; Household Power Relations; Symbolic Violence; Human Rights.

1. Introduction

Women's participation in household decision-making is a significant indicator of gender equality, social justice, and the realisation of human rights. The household, often perceived as a private and harmonious domain, is also a social space where power, authority, resources, and responsibilities are negotiated and distributed. Within marital relationships, women's autonomy is reflected in their ability to participate in decisions concerning household finances, children's education, healthcare, personal mobility, reproductive choices, and the management of

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domestic affairs. However, such participation is not always determined by individual preferences; rather, it is shaped by socio- cultural expectations, economic circumstances, educational opportunities, and historically embedded gender relations (Jejeebhoy, 2000; Kabeer, 2005). Consequently, understanding women's decision-making autonomy requires examining both their individual capacities and the structural conditions within which their agency is exercised.

Existing scholarship has established important relationships between women's education, economic participation, and household bargaining power. Education enhances women's access to knowledge, information, and opportunities, potentially strengthening their capacity to negotiate decisions within marital relationships (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005). Similarly, access to independent income and productive resources can improve women's bargaining positions and influence the distribution of household responsibilities and expenditure (Anderson and Eswaran, 2009; Duflo, 2012). Nevertheless, economic participation does not necessarily ensure equal authority, as women's contributions may coexist with persistent patriarchal expectations and unequal domestic responsibilities. Family structure also influences these negotiations. In extended or joint households, senior male members and in-laws may exercise considerable authority over financial and personal decisions, whereas some nuclear households provide greater opportunities for spousal negotiation and shared decision-making (Desai and Andrist, 2010). These variations indicate that women's autonomy is embedded in wider structures of kinship, gender, and social relations.

To interpret these dynamics, the present study draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, particularly the interconnected concepts of habitus, capital, and field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Habitus refers to the internalised dispositions, perceptions, and practices developed through individuals' social experiences. In the context of marital relationships, gendered habitus may shape expectations concerning women's domestic responsibilities, financial dependence, mobility, and appropriate social behaviour. Capital, encompassing economic, cultural, social, and symbolic resources, influences individuals' positions and capacity to exercise authority within a particular social space. Women's educational qualifications and financial resources may constitute important forms of cultural and economic capital, while participation in community organisations and self-help groups can expand their social networks and resources. The household, in this framework, can be conceptualised as a gendered field in which family members occupy unequal positions and negotiate access to resources, recognition, and decision-making authority. Bourdieu's (2001) analysis of masculine domination and symbolic violence further provides a perspective for understanding how historically established gender hierarchies become normalised through everyday practices. However, women's accommodation of established expectations should not automatically be interpreted as an absence of agency; rather, their everyday practices may involve negotiation, adaptation, and resistance within existing constraints.

This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to examining the relationship between women's apparent participation and their substantive decision-making autonomy. A woman may manage everyday household expenditure without having authority over savings, investments, or major financial commitments. Similarly, participation in family planning

discussions does not necessarily imply independent control over reproductive choices. Such distinctions highlight the importance of examining not merely whether women participate in household decisions, but also the extent of their control, influence, and freedom to make choices. Kabeer's (2005) understanding of empowerment as a process involving resources, agency, and achievements complements this analysis by drawing attention to the relationship between access to resources and the ability to exercise meaningful choices.

The study also adopts a human rights perspective, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Article 15 recognises women's equality before the law, while Article 16 addresses equality in marriage and family relations, including equal rights and responsibilities, reproductive decision-making, occupation, and property-related matters (United Nations, 1979). These provisions establish an important normative framework for examining inequalities in household decision-making. Although India has ratified CEDAW, the translation of formal legal commitments into everyday household practices remains an important area of sociological and anthropological investigation.

Against this background, the present study explores the factors shaping married women's participation in household decision-making in Haldia and its adjoining areas of Purba Medinipur, West Bengal. Based on twelve qualitative case studies of women from diverse educational, occupational, and socio-economic backgrounds, it examines their experiences concerning financial management, domestic responsibilities, personal mobility, and reproductive autonomy.

2. Research Objectives

The present study aims to examine married women's household decision-making autonomy through Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and a human rights perspective. The objectives are:

i. To examine the influence of educational attainment, occupational engagement, and economic resources on married women's participation and autonomy in household decision-making, particularly concerning financial management, domestic responsibilities, personal mobility, and reproductive choices.
ii. To analyse how gendered habitus, different forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic), and family structures shape, reproduce, and negotiate power relations within the domestic field.
iii. To explore women's lived experiences of agency and constraints in household decision-making and assess the implications of these experiences for gender equality and the realisation of women's human rights in the context of CEDAW.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Ethnographic Approach

The present study adopts a qualitative anthropological research design, drawing upon an ethnographically informed approach to understand married women's lived experiences, everyday practices, and decision-making autonomy within the household. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to explore the meanings women attach to their

roles, relationships, responsibilities, and choices rather than measure decision- making autonomy through numerical indicators. Ethnographic research is concerned with understanding social practices and interactions within their wider cultural and social contexts, giving importance to participants' perspectives and the meanings they attribute to everyday experiences (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Reeves et al., 2008).

In this study, the ethnographic orientation is reflected in the collection and interpretation of women's personal narratives concerning household finances, domestic responsibilities, personal mobility, and reproductive choices. These narratives provide insights into how gender roles, marital relationships, kinship structures, and prevailing social expectations shape women's participation in household decision-making. Rather than treating the household as an isolated private unit, the study approaches it as a social field in which authority, resources, responsibilities, and individual agency are negotiated.

The theoretical interpretation is guided by Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, particularly the concepts of habitus, capital, and field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). These concepts help examine how women's educational qualifications, occupational positions, economic resources, and social relationships influence their capacity to negotiate household decisions. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is incorporated as the normative human rights framework for interpreting women's autonomy and equality within marriage and family relations (United Nations, 1979).

3.2 Study Area and Participants

The field-based study was conducted in Haldia and its adjoining areas of Purba Medinipur district, West Bengal, India. The study focused on married women belonging to diverse socio-economic, educational, and occupational backgrounds. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 50 years. The selection aimed to include women with different levels of formal education, employment status, and family circumstances in order to understand the variations in their household decision-making experiences.

A total of twelve married women participated in the study. Their experiences provided an opportunity to explore differences in decision- making authority between women engaged in paid employment and those involved in unpaid domestic work, as well as between women living in different family arrangements. The study did not seek statistical representativeness; rather, it aimed to develop a contextual understanding of women's agency and constraints through a small number of detailed case narratives.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to select the twelve participants. This sampling strategy was considered appropriate because the study required participants who could provide relevant experiences and perspectives concerning married women's roles in household decision-making. Participants were selected to ensure variation in educational attainment, occupation, and socio-economic background.

The inclusion of women from different backgrounds enabled a comparative examination of how access to education, income, and social resources may influence women's participation in

decisions concerning household expenditure, savings, children's education, domestic management, personal mobility, and reproductive health. Purposive selection is consistent with qualitative research, where participants are chosen for the relevance and richness of the information they can contribute to the research questions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

3.4 Data Collection Techniques

PSudipary data were collected during October 2026 through in-depth, semi- structured interviews. The interviews encouraged participants to narrate their experiences in their own words and provided scope for exploring issues relevant to their individual circumstances. The semi-structured format ensured that the principal research themes were addressed while allowing participants to elaborate on experiences that they considered important.

The interviews focused on four broad dimensions of household decision- making:

a) Financial decision-making: Women's participation in managing household expenditure, budgeting, savings, investments, and major purchases, including their access to and control over personal income.

b) Household management and domestic responsibilities: Women's involvement in decisions concerning everyday household affairs, children's education, family responsibilities, and the distribution of domestic work.

c) Personal mobility and autonomy: Women's freedom to visit relatives, participate in community activities, pursue employment, and make decisions concerning their personal lives.

d) Reproductive decision-making: Women's participation in decisions concerning contraception, family planning, reproductive health, and related healthcare choices.

The interview narratives were treated as situated accounts of everyday social experiences. Attention was given not only to what participants reported about their decision-making roles but also to the family and socio- economic circumstances within which those decisions were made. This contextual orientation is important in ethnographic research, where individual accounts are interpreted in relation to wider social relationships, cultural expectations, and everyday practices (Reeves et al., 2008).

3.5 Data Analysis and Theoretical Interpretation

The collected narratives were examined through an interpretive approach to identify recurring themes, differences, and patterns in women's experiences. The analysis focused on understanding how educational attainment, occupational engagement, economic resources, and family structures influenced women's participation in household decision-making. Particular attention was given to similarities and differences across the twelve cases.

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice provided the principal sociological framework for interpreting the findings. The concept of habitus was used to understand how internalised gender norms and socially acquired expectations influence women's perceptions of household responsibilities and decision- making roles. The concept of capital helped examine how economic resources,

educational qualifications, social networks, and socially recognised status may shape women's ability to negotiate authority within the household. The concept of field provided a way to interpret the household as a relational space in which women and other family members occupy unequal positions and negotiate access to resources and decision-making power (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990).

The analysis also considered the ways in which unequal gender relations may become normalised through everyday practices and expectations. However, women's agency was not understood as entirely determined by their social position. Their narratives were examined for instances of negotiation, accommodation, and individual assertion, recognising that women's autonomy may vary across different domains of household life.

Alongside this theoretical interpretation, CEDAW was used as a human rights framework to consider the implications of women's experiences for equality within marriage and family relations. Particular attention was given to the principles of equality before the law, freedom of movement, access to healthcare, and equal rights and responsibilities in marriage and family life (United Nations, 1979). The combined theoretical and normative approach enabled the study to connect everyday household experiences with wider questions of gendered power and women's human rights.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study followed basic ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and their participation was voluntary. Confidentiality was maintained in presenting the interview narratives, and identifying information was anonymised to protect participants' privacy. Particular care is necessary when discussing personal mobility, marital relationships, and reproductive choices, as these are potentially sensitive areas of women's lives.

7. Methodological Scope and Delimitations

The study is exploratory and based on twelve qualitative interviews conducted during October 2026 in Haldia and adjoining areas of Purba Medinipur. Its findings provide contextual insights into the experiences of the women interviewed and are not intended to represent all married women in the district or in West Bengal.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Education, Cultural Capital and Women's Participation in Household Decision-Making

Educational attainment appears to strengthen women's confidence, financial awareness, and participation in household decision-making. The experiences of Anima Mondal, Sumitra Pattanayak, and Bithi Samanta, who are professionally employed and relatively highly educated, illustrate this relationship. Their narratives reflect the importance of education as a form of cultural capital that may strengthen women's capacity to communicate their preferences, understand financial matters, and participate in decisions concerning their families. Anima Mondal (35, School Teacher, Master's Degree) narrated

"*I jointly manage household expenses and make decisions with my husband regarding major purchases, children's education, health, savings, and investments. My opinions are respected, and I enjoy personal freedom*."

From Bourdieu's perspective, Anima's educational qualification represents cultural capital, while her professional position provides economic capital. These resources strengthen her position within the household field, enabling greater participation in domestic negotiations.

Sumitra Pattanayak (30, School Teacher, Master's Degree) also narrated

"*I manage the household budget, while my husband and I jointly decide on major financial matters and our children's future. My financial independence also allows me to participate in community activities*."

Sumitra's experience reflects the interaction of economic, cultural, and social capital. Her educational and financial resources, combined with community networks, enhance her confidence and position in household decision-making.

Bithi Samanta (25, Software Developer, Bachelor's Degree) shared

"*My husband and I share household responsibilities, track expenses together, and jointly make investment decisions. I enjoy independence in personal spending and career development."*

Bithi's professional and educational resources contribute to her economic autonomy. Her shared decision-making practices also suggest a habitus that accommodates more egalitarian gender relations within the household.

These narratives demonstrate that education and occupational resources can strengthen women's agency and bargaining power. However, following Bourdieu, the influence of capital is mediated by habitus and existing power relations. Similarly, Kabeer's (2005) framework highlights that resources become empowering when women can translate them into agency and meaningful achievements. Thus, education alone does not guarantee equality; its transformative potential depends on women's ability to exercise decision-making power within the household.

5.2 Economic Capital, Occupational Engagement and Financial Autonomy

Women's participation in income-generating activities and their control over financial resources influence their involvement in household decision-making. Sudipa Das (28, Homemaker, Higher Secondary Education):

"*I manage household expenses and savings, take the lead in decisions concerning my children's education, and discuss major investments with my husband. I also earn through sewing and wish to explore more financial opportunities*."

From Bourdieu's perspective, Sudipa's limited income from sewing represents a form of economic capital, while her participation in village activities may contribute to social capital. However, her dependence on household agricultural resources indicates that her economic

capital does not provide complete financial autonomy.

Basanti Jana (30, Tailor, Class X) reported

"*I manage household savings and financial planning, while my husband and I jointly decide on investments. My tailoring work and participation in self-help groups help me contribute financially*."

Basanti's tailoring income represents economic capital, while self-help group participation provides opportunities to accumulate social capital. These resources may strengthen her bargaining position within the household, although her aspiration for greater independence indicates existing limitations.

Shiuli Das (24, Homemaker, Class VIII) shared

"*I manage daily household expenses and decisions concerning my child's education. Major purchases are discussed jointly, and I wish to have more financial resources for my child's future*."

Shiuli's experience illustrates the distinction between financial management and financial control. Although she exercises responsibility over routine expenditure, her limited economic capital restricts her autonomy over major financial decisions.

Mandira Maity (22, Homemaker, Class VI) also shared

"*I manage daily expenses within the budget provided by my husband. My suggestions are considered in major purchases, and I wish to develop skills to contribute financially*."

Mandira's limited access to economic capital restricts her financial autonomy. Her desire to acquire skills reflects an aspiration to strengthen her agency and improve her position within the household field.

These narratives demonstrate that economic contribution does not automatically translate into financial autonomy. Bourdieu's concepts of economic and social capital, along with habitus and household power relations, help explain variations in women's bargaining positions. Similarly, Kabeer's (2005) framework suggests that access to resources becomes empowering only when women can exercise agency and influence meaningful decisions. Thus, the study distinguishes between earning income, managing household finances, and exercising independent control over economic resources. The present cases suggest that the relationship between income and decision-making is not simply linear. The nature of employment, the control women exercise over their earnings, and the recognition of their economic contributions within the family are equally important.

From Bourdieu's perspective, economic capital can strengthen women's position within the household field, but its effectiveness is mediated by gendered habitus and existing family hierarchies.

5.3 Economic Dependence, Patriarchal Habitus and Unequal Household Authority

The experiences of the respondents reveal how economic dependence and patriarchal family

structures influence women's participation in household decision-making. Their narratives indicate that domestic responsibilities do not necessarily translate into financial authority or equal decision-making power. Shila Ari (40, Non-literate Homemaker) reported

"*My husband makes all major financial and household decisions. I manage household chores and childcare but have little control over financial matters. I wish to participate more in decision-making*."

Shila's experience reflects a gendered habitus in which domestic responsibilities are assigned to women while financial authority remains concentrated in men's hands. Her limited economic capital restricts her position within the household field.

Manisha Ghora (20, Married Student, Higher Secondary Education) shared

"*My father-in-law makes most financial decisions. I depend on my husband for personal expenses and need family permission to stay out late*."

Manisha's experience reflects patriarchal authority embedded in generational and kinship hierarchies. Through Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of *bargaining with patriarchy*, her restricted mobility can be understood as negotiated freedom within an unequal household structure.

Arati Pramanik (28, Homemaker, Secondary Education) said

"*My husband and father-in-law make most financial decisions. I manage household responsibilities but have little control over savings and investments*."

Her experience demonstrates the unequal distribution of authority within the household field. Despite performing domestic responsibilities, her limited economic capital restricts her bargaining position and financial autonomy.

Dipali Maity (23, Homemaker, Higher Secondary Education) shared

"*My husband manages household finances and family planning. I inform my husband or in-laws before going out, and my husband accompanies me when I return late.*"

Dipali's narrative illustrates Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence; whereby gendered restrictions may become normalised through everyday practices. Her statement that everything is fine suggests the coexistence of acceptance and unequal power relations.

The concept of symbolic violence is also relevant. Symbolic violence does not necessarily operate through explicit coercion; it may function when unequal social arrangements are accepted as natural, legitimate, or inevitable (Bourdieu, 2001). Dipali's statement that *"Everything is fine"* and Shila's reported satisfaction alongside her desire for greater participation illustrate why women's own evaluations must be interpreted sensitively. These statements should not be treated as proof that inequality is absent, nor should the researcher assume that participants are unaware of their circumstances. Rather, they reveal how gendered expectations, personal aspirations, and practical constraints may coexist.

Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of *"bargaining with patriarchy"* further helps interpret these cases. Women may negotiate limited freedoms or practical concessions within patriarchal family

arrangements without necessarily transforming the broader distribution of authority. Manisha's participation in social events subject to restrictions on late outings, and Dipali's mobility with family notification and accompaniment, may be understood as forms of negotiated freedom. Such practices indicate that women's agency is neither entirely absent nor fully independent; it is exercised within unequal structures of power.

5.4 Family Structure, Kinship Hierarchy and the Domestic Field

The contrast between Manisha's dependence on her father-in-law and Jaya Lila Bibi's extensive decision-making authority further demonstrates that family authority cannot be explained through marital status or educational attainment alone. Women's positions are shaped by the specific configuration of relationships, resources, responsibilities, and expectations within each household. The household can be interpreted as a social field in which different members occupy positions shaped by age, gender, economic resources, marital status, and socially recognised authority. The distribution of power within this field is not necessarily equal. Senior male members may possess greater authority over investments and major expenditure, while younger women may be expected to undertake domestic responsibilities and seek approval for personal decisions.

The experiences of Anima and Sumitra, whose narratives describe relatively collaborative marital relationships, contrast with those of Manisha and Arati, where senior male family members exercise substantial financial authority. These cases suggest that family arrangements and kinship hierarchies can influence the opportunities available to women.

5.5 Domestic Labour, Gendered Responsibilities and the Paradox of Agency

Shila's description

"*I take care of household management, my children's education, and all financial planning. I feel independent in decision-making and have the freedom to participate in social activities. I make personal expense decisions and feel empowered in my role*."

Jaya's narrative differs significantly from those of Shila, Manisha, Arati, and Dipali. She exercises considerable authority over household management, financial planning, children's education, personal expenses, and social participation. Her case demonstrates that a woman does not necessarily require high formal educational qualifications or a professional occupation to exercise substantial decision-making autonomy.

The narratives of Anima, Sumitra, and Bithi offer a contrasting pattern in which household responsibilities are described as shared or negotiated. Bithi explicitly states that "*Household chores are shared*," while Sumitra describes delegating responsibilities to her husband and children. These examples indicate that changes in domestic practices can accompany more equitable decision-making relationships.

From a human rights perspective, CEDAW's Article 5 calls for the elimination of stereotyped roles for men and women, including those associated with family responsibilities. Article 11 addresses equality in employment, while Article 16 concerns equality in marriage and family relations (United Nations, 1979). These provisions offer a normative basis for examining the

gendered organisation of domestic responsibilities. The findings suggest that household equality requires not only women's participation in decisions but also greater recognition and sharing of unpaid domestic work.

5.6 Personal Mobility, Social Participation and Conditional Freedom

Women's freedom of movement emerges as another important dimension of household autonomy. The narratives reveal differences between women who can participate in community activities and those whose movement is subject to notification, permission, or accompaniment by family members.

In contrast, Shila is required to inform her husband before visiting her father's home. Manisha must seek permission before staying out late, while Arati experiences similar restrictions. Dipali explains that she must inform her husband or in-laws before going somewhere and that her husband accompanies her when she returns late. These accounts suggest that freedom of movement may be conditional rather than absolute. Women may be permitted to participate in social activities, but the conditions governing such participation are shaped by household expectations and gendered norms.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain how these expectations become part of everyday social practice. The regulation of women's movement may be understood as an expression of gendered dispositions concerning respectability, family responsibility, and the appropriate conduct of married women. Such practices can reproduce unequal power relations even in the absence of direct confrontation.

From the human rights perspective, Article 15 of CEDAW recognises women's equality before the law and their legal capacity, while Article 16 addresses equality in marriage and family relations (United Nations, 1979). The restrictions described by some participants therefore raise questions about the practical realisation of women's autonomy within family life. The study does not claim to make a legal determination about individual cases; rather, it highlights the gap that may exist between formal equality and women's everyday experiences of mobility and personal choice.

5.7 Reproductive Autonomy and the Negotiation of Bodily Choices

Reproductive decision-making provides a particularly sensitive dimension of women's autonomy. Dipali states that her husband takes care of family planning and birth control, while Arati's account suggests limited discussion of reproductive choices. Manisha's narrative also leaves uncertainty concerning her participation in contraceptive decisions. Shila's experience is particularly significant because she reports making an independent decision to use birth control pills:

"*I have taken birth control pills but that was my own decision"*- a rare moment of autonomy.

Bourdieu's framework helps situate reproductive decisions within the wider household field, where gendered expectations and unequal access to resources may influence women's bodily choices. However, reproductive autonomy must also be understood as an important dimension of individual agency that cannot be inferred solely from a woman's financial or educational

position.

Kabeer's (2005) emphasis on agency is useful in this context because it directs attention to women's capacity to make meaningful choices concerning their own lives. CEDAW Article 12 addresses equality in access to healthcare, while Article 16 concerns equality in marriage and family relations (United Nations, 1979). The narratives therefore highlight the importance of women's access to reproductive healthcare, information, and the ability to make decisions without coercion.

5.8 Agency, Accommodation and Everyday Negotiation

A central insight emerging from the twelve cases is that women's agency cannot be understood through a simple distinction between empowered and disempowered women. Their experiences indicate different degrees of autonomy across financial, domestic, social, and reproductive domains. A woman may exercise considerable control over household budgeting while lacking independent income; another may have limited financial authority but exercise personal choice concerning contraception. The narratives caution against interpreting women's acceptance of existing arrangements as straightforward evidence of consent. Dipali's statement that "*Everything is fine*" must be read alongside her description of her husband's control over finances and family planning. Similarly, Shila's reported satisfaction coexists with her wish for greater participation. These accounts should neither be dismissed as false consciousness nor treated as proof that no inequality exists. They require an interpretive approach that recognises women's own accounts while examining the structural conditions within which their choices are made.

These differences support the argument that agency is relational and domain-specific. Kabeer's (2005) framework helps explain why access to resources, the ability to make choices, and the outcomes of those choices should be examined together. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice further demonstrates that agency is exercised within social fields structured by unequal access to different forms of capital and by historically embedded dispositions.

5.9 Household Decision-Making and the Human Rights Framework

The findings have important implications for understanding the relationship between everyday household practices and women's human rights. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provides a normative framework for examining equality and non-discrimination across different aspects of women's lives. Its provisions are relevant to the major themes emerging from this study: Article 5 addresses gender stereotypes and socially prescribed roles; Article 11 concerns equality in employment; Article 12 relates to access to healthcare; Article 15 recognises equality before the law and legal capacity; and Article 16 addresses equality in marriage and family relations (United Nations, 1979).

The narratives reveal that formal recognition of women's rights does not automatically ensure equal participation in household decision-making. Women may undertake substantial domestic responsibilities without having control over household finances, or they may participate in social activities only within conditions determined by family members. Similarly, being

consulted about reproductive matters does not necessarily mean having the authority to make the final decision. These accounts underline the distinction between nominal participation and substantive autonomy.

The study further demonstrates that human rights should not be assessed solely through the presence or absence of overt restrictions. Everyday practices concerning money, mobility, domestic work, and family planning may reproduce unequal relationships even when they are described as ordinary or acceptable within the household. From Bourdieu's perspective, such practices may become embedded in gendered habitus and contribute to the reproduction of power relations. Symbolic violence may operate when unequal arrangements are perceived as natural or legitimate, although participants' own understandings and evaluations must be respected rather than dismissed.

At the same time, the narratives reveal examples of cooperation, negotiation, and individual autonomy. Anima, Sumitra, and Bithi describe relatively egalitarian marital relationships; Basanti and Sudipa participate in income-generating activities; Shila makes an independent contraceptive choice; and Jaya exercises substantial financial and household authority. These cases demonstrate that household relations are not fixed and that women negotiate their positions in different ways. The findings therefore identify a continuing gap between the normative principles of equality and the varied realities of women's household experiences. Strengthening substantive autonomy requires attention to education, employment, control over income, freedom of movement, reproductive healthcare, recognition of unpaid domestic work, and transformation of gendered expectations within family relationships.

5.10 Gendered Power Relations and Women's Agency: Key Insights

The twelve narratives demonstrate that married women's household decision-making autonomy is shaped by the interaction of educational attainment, occupational engagement, economic resources, kinship relations, family structure, and gender norms. Women with higher educational qualifications and professional employment generally report greater participation in financial and personal decisions. However, the cases of Jaya, Shila, and other participants demonstrate that autonomy cannot be predicted by education or occupation alone. Women's agency varies across domains and is affected by the specific relationships and resources available within each household.

Economic contribution may strengthen women's bargaining positions, but managing household expenditure is not equivalent to controlling financial resources. Family structure and generational hierarchy can influence who exercises authority over major decisions. Women's mobility and reproductive choices are also shaped by the conditions governing their everyday lives. Furthermore, participation in decision-making does not necessarily imply an equal distribution of domestic responsibilities. Jaya's considerable decision-making authority, for instance, coexists with a substantial domestic workload, while some women with limited financial authority exercise choice in other domains.

Through Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, these findings reveal the household as a social field in which gendered habitus and unequal access to capital shape the distribution of authority (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Kabeer's framework highlights the importance of resources, agency,

and achievements in understanding women's ability to make meaningful choices (Kabeer, 2005). Kandiyoti's concept of bargaining with patriarchy helps explain the negotiated character of everyday autonomy, whereby women may secure limited freedoms or influence without necessarily transforming the overall structure of household authority (Kandiyoti, 1988). CEDAW provides the normative framework for relating these experiences to women's rights and equality within family life (United Nations, 1979).

Overall, the study argues that women's agency should be understood as dynamic, relational, and context-dependent. Household decision-making is not simply a reflection of individual preference; it is shaped by broader social structures that may reproduce inequality while also providing spaces for negotiation and change. The central insight is that meaningful autonomy requires both women's capacity to participate in decisions and the transformation of the gendered norms, resource distributions, and family hierarchies that shape those decisions.

5. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that women's participation in household decision-making is shaped by the interaction of educational attainment, economic resources, occupational engagement, family structure, and prevailing patriarchal norms. The narratives of twelve married women reveal that decision-making autonomy varies across financial management, domestic responsibilities, personal mobility, and reproductive choices. Although education and independent income enhance women's participation, they do not automatically guarantee equal authority within the household.

Drawing upon Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1977, 1990, 2001), the findings indicate that women's decision-making positions are influenced by their access to economic, cultural, and social capital, as well as by gendered habitus. Unequal household arrangements are often reproduced through everyday practices and may become normalised through symbolic violence. Kabeer's (2005) framework further highlights that empowerment involves the interaction of resources, agency, and achievements, while Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of bargaining with patriarchy explains how women negotiate their positions within existing gender hierarchies.

The study also reveals that women's agency exists in varying degrees, ranging from active participation and financial autonomy to negotiation, accommodation, and restricted involvement. Importantly, managing household responsibilities does not necessarily ensure control over financial resources or personal choices.

Overall, the findings suggest that women's empowerment cannot be understood solely through educational qualifications or economic contributions. It must also be examined in relation to the household power structures, gendered expectations, and social practices that shape their everyday experiences. Meaningful empowerment therefore involves both women's ability to exercise agency and the transformation of unequal domestic relationships, ensuring greater equality, autonomy, dignity, and participation in household decision-making.

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