

Exploring the Socio-Economic and Cultural Norms in Shaping Women's Role in Decision Making Process

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Abstract

Women's participation in household and community decision-making is widely recognized as a fundamental indicator of gender equality, social inclusion, and sustainable development. Despite notable progress in education, employment, and legal rights, women in many developing societies continue to encounter socio-economic and cultural barriers that restrict their influence over decisions concerning household finances, healthcare, education, mobility, employment, and community affairs. This study aims to explore how socio-economic factors and cultural norms shape women's role in the decision-making process. The present study is conducted in Faisalabad City (Ghulam Muhammad Abad and Kaleem Shaheed Colony), on socio-economic and cultural factors that influence decision-making ability of women. One hundred and twenty women were selected for the study to investigate the role of education, income, employment, cultural values, socio-economic differences, structural barriers in influencing women's participation in household and community decision making. Data was collected through Interview schedule and analyzed through SPSS. Based on the descriptive findings, women have a moderate level of decision-making authority, showing that women are involved in decisions but not completely given freedom of choice. The results of the correlation analysis showed that socio-economic factors are positively correlated with women's decision-making power, cultural norms have significant negative correlation while structural barriers are strongly and negatively connected with women's decision-making power. Socio-economic comparison further showed a moderate positive association suggesting better socio-economic status is linked with greater autonomy of women compared to lower socio-economic status. Regression analysis also revealed that the proposed model accounts for 67% of the variance of women's decision-making power, indicating that the selected variables have a relatively high percentage of explaining women's decision-making power. In general, it is concluded that the economic opportunities, cultural values and structural influences are found to have a combined effect on decision-making power of women households in Faisalabad. Lack of investment in education, employment and income limits women's active participation in household and community affairs although improvements in these areas can lead to an increase in women's autonomy.

Keywords: Cultural Norms, Decision, Socio-Economic, Women's Role, regression, correlation

Introduction

Today the role of women in decision-making matters has emerged as an agenda in the discussions on the issue of development, gender equality and social justice across the world. In contemporary cultures, decisions are not only made in isolation, but also are indicative of power, social order and cultural norms in determining roles and status of individuals in society. In developing countries such as Pakistan, women's roles in decision-making process are significantly constrained by complex socioeconomic and cultural issues within the family or couples, community and even institutional environment (Agarwal, 2010). Pakistan is a society with a strong tradition of male-dominated society where gender roles is fixed in the culture and social norms. Those traditional ideas set assigned positions for men as the decision makers and women as the less important decision makers, especially in their family and community communities. The ideology of gender division of labor focuses mostly on women as care-takers and homemakers, and men as breadwinners and power-brokers. Historically, this structure has restricted women's autonomy and given them less decision-making power to make choices on matters directly affecting their lives (Anderson & Eswaran, 2010). While constitutions, progressive international frameworks and legislation ensure gender equality, rights are not fully realized. One of the obstacles to the active involvement of the Pakistani women in decision making is socio-economic difficulties faced by them, including social pressures, economic dependence, limited mobility and access to education. These restrictions multiply among women's empowerment, also due to deep-seated patriarchal ideas and cultural beliefs related to honor, and traditional religious beliefs. Since the capacity of women for decision-making is being explored in a unique context, Faisalabad as an urban center, is selected for the analysis (Johnson, 2010). Faisalabad is one of the biggest industrial cities in Pakistan, where there are compounds of traditional and modern social structure. Gradual changes in gender roles have been stimulated by rapid urbanization, and improved education and job prospects. Yet there are cultural norms that still trap women and undermine their liberty, even among those at low economic and socioeconomic levels that are deeply entrenched. The empowerment of women regarding decisions in decision-making is a concept that is multi-faceted and has multiple aspects ranging from household decisions, like spending, healthcare decisions and children's education, to economic decisions, such as work, financial management, to social decisions like mobility, participation in community life, and political engagement (Mason, 2010). Women's participation in these areas is often regarded as a measure of women's empowerment and social status. Study shows that a woman's involvement in the decision-making process is not only good for her own health but contributes to the happiness of the household, and to the growth of the community. The extent of the women's decision-making power varies from one part of society to another. To a large extent, it is a measure of socio-economic status including education, income, occupation and family structure. Importantly, education plays a crucial role in raising awareness, self-confidence and ability of women in family bargaining (Ahmed & Fielding, 2024). Highly educated women have a higher likelihood of being engaged in decision making and expressing preferences in issues that are important to them on an equal footing with their husbands. Economically active women enjoy higher autonomy in the society as compared to those that are economically dependent. Lower socio-economic status women may be at more disadvantage because they do not easily receive education, become economically dependent and have limitations from traditional values. They are frequently ignored or sometimes totally excluded from decision making of members of the family usually dominated by males. This disparity underscores the importance of considering socioeconomic factors as determinants of female empowerment. Cultural norms and traditions are another important determinant that impacts women's decision-making power (Shrestha, 2021). The culture of Pakistan encourages women to remain humble and submissive, to be housewives, and to exclude them from social life or challenge male dominance. Customs such as veiling, early marriage, and preference for sons further exacerbate gender inequality. These norms

not only restrict women's actions and access to resources but also affect their self-perception and assessment of their abilities. Another complexity in women's decision-making lies in the influence of extended family systems, particularly in extended family structures. In such families, decisions are sometimes made by older male members, and younger women are often excluded and have no voice (Zafar & Qureshi, 2023).

Significance

This study helps to identify the impact of socio-economic and cultural factors on women's involvement in the household and community decision making in Faisalabad. It accentuates factors such as education, income, employment and resources that enhance women's autonomy and decision-making power, but as well highlights factors which remain limiting women's empowerment such as patriarchal norms and unequal opportunities, and women's limited mobility. The findings are used as evidence in 'making the case' for context-specific policies, practices and interventions to secure gender equality, women's inclusion and economic independence. In general, the study highlights that women's empowerment is a challenge that is not sustainable unless it considers both socio-economic inequalities and the structural obstacles, following the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the impact of socio-economic factors such as education, income, occupation and family structure on women's participation in household and community decision making.
- To examine the impact of cultural values, traditional practices and role on women autonomy in decision making process in various localities of Faisalabad.
- To obtain empirical information which can inform context-specific policies and interventions for increasing women's participation and representation in household and community decision-making within various socio-economic groups in Faisalabad.

T

heoretical Framework

The study is based on number of theories linking socio-economic and cultural influences with women's role in decision making.

Feminist Theory: According to Cornwall (2016) women are not represented in the decision making of the households, communities, or political sphere, as men tend to dominate. It drives for equal access to education, employment, legal right and policy changes to achieve gender equality.

Intersectionality Theory: According to Cho *et al.*, (2013) experiences of women vary based on a range of factors class, education, religion, ethnicity, age, and location. Such an overlapping identity forms various layers of inequality and determines the decisions opportunities of the girls and women.

Capability Approach: According to Robeyns (2005) women's real freedom of making choices are not just access to resources. Empowerment must exist on both an opportunity and skills perspective, otherwise there will be no opportunities for others to take advantage of without the social barrier, making it difficult for them to participate.

Methodology

Present study was conducted in Faisalabad city. A sampling method was employed to obtain response on the socioeconomic background, residential areas and cultural contexts in Faisalabad. The population was segmented into proper sections according to the income and education. All these segments were selected in a way of simple random sampling to ensure the representation of the community. Women were chosen for inclusion in the study. The respondents were selected from each segment in an equal proportion to get the balanced and

diversified sample. Through this methodology, it was possible to detect the differences existing in some of the socioeconomic and cultural norms and how they affected the role that women play in the decision-making of the family. The sample size of 120 female respondents was taken from the estimated size of women in Faisalabad through simple random sampling technique. This size was deemed to be adequate to find statistically significant patterns and relationships among the socioeconomic and cultural norms and women's role in decision-making. The data gathered via interview schedule that included items with Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Measures taken with the instrument included socioeconomic status, cultural norms and women's participation in the decision-making process within the family and community. The Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 22.0. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to describe the data, Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis were applied to explore and check the impacts of socio-economic and cultural variables on the role of women in decision-making. The technique made sure that the results of the study will be reliable, valid, and analyzed systematically.

Results and discussion

This involved data analysis and interpretation. SPSS software was used for data analysis. Descriptive and inferential statistics were performed, and measures such as mean, standard deviation, correlation, and regression were employed. The data were interpreted based on the results. The first section covers demographic information, frequencies, and percentages. The second section deals with descriptive statistics.

Table 4.1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N = 120)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18–25 years	38	31.7
	26–35 years	42	35.0
	36–45 years	24	20.0
	46 years & above	16	13.3
Education Level	No formal education	18	15.0
	Primary	22	18.3
	Middle	20	16.7
	Matric	30	25.0
	Intermediate	18	15.0
	Graduate & above	12	10.0
Income Level	Low income ($\leq$ 30,000 PKR)	50	41.7
	Middle income (30,001–70,000 PKR)	52	43.3
	High income (70,001+ PKR)	18	15.0
Occupation	Housewife	66	55.0
	Government employee	14	11.7
	Private employee	18	15.0
	Self-employed	12	10.0
	Others	10	8.3
Locality	Ghulam Muhammad Abad	60	50.0
	Kaleem Shaheed Colony	60	50.0
Family Type	Nuclear family	48	40.0
	Joint family	62	51.7
	Extended family	10	8.3

Marital Status	Married	85	70.8
	Unmarried	25	20.8
	Widow/Separated	10	8.3
Total Respondents		120	100

In table 4.1, the demographic profile reveals that the majority of the respondents were young women of 26-35 years (35.0%) hence the study was mainly attuned to the views of women of the active family and working age. There was moderate education attained, dominated by Matric school education (25.0%), and only 10.0% attained a graduate level education and above, indicating the challenges of educational inequality. The majority of respondents (43.3%) had middle income and low income families (41.7%) indicating poor economic conditions for most families (Akter, 2022). Financial dependence continued to be prevalent, as 55.0% of women were housewives. The distribution of the sample was also balanced so that Ghulam Muhammad Abad and Kaleem Shaheed Colony are equally represented. Just over half of the respondents had lived in the 'joint family' (51.7%) where traditional family hierarchy may limit women's autonomy, compared to 40.0% who lived in nuclear families which tend to offer more opportunities for decision-making among themselves (Raz et al., 2025). Moreover, the majority of respondents were married (70.8 %), indicating the study's focus was on primarily the active female members of households. Overall, the demographic characteristics suggest that age, level of education and income, employment, family structure, marital status and socio-economic opportunities are all a reflection of the decision making power of women in Faisalabad and that cultural and patriarchal norms often limit these opportunities.

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Women's Decision-Making Power (WDMP)	3.12	0.84
Socio-Economic Factors (SEF)	3.35	0.78
Cultural Norms & Gender Expectations (CNGE)	3.62	0.81
Socio-Economic Comparison Index (SECI)	3.21	0.73
Barriers & Empowerment Factors (BEF)	3.74	0.69

In table 4.2, the overall decision making status of the women in Faisalabad is medium but restricted (mean score is 3.12) which means that women are only partially autonomous in making household and personal decisions. Decision making is positively influenced by socio-economic factors (M = 3.35) and socio-economic comparison (M = 3.21) with higher education, employment, income and better socio-economic status, leading to participation of women in more decision making process. Yet cultural norms and gender expectations (M = 3.62) and barriers and empowering attributes (M = 3.74) were the greatest influences to emerge which indicate that there is ongoing constraint on women's autonomy within and due to cultural force and social interventions despite opportunities for their empowerment (Zafar & Qureshi, 2023). The moderate level of standard deviations (0.69-0.84) suggest that there is variation in the experience of women depending on their socio-economic background, level of education, and family structure. Overall, the findings suggest although socio-economic improvements do help to empower women, it is the cultural and structural constraints that are the main barriers to equal decision-making power.

Table 4.3: Correlation Matrix

Variables	WDMP	SEF	CNGE	SECI	BEF
WDMP	1				
SEF	0.58**	1			
CNGE	-0.64**	-0.39**	1		
SECI	0.52**	0.46**	-0.41**	1	
BEF	-0.71**	-0.48**	0.66**	-0.55**	1

In table 4.3 shows that all independent variables have statistically significant relationships ($p < 0.01$) with women's decision-making power. The results showed that socio-economic factors have a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.58$), which means that the higher the education level, income, and the employment status, the higher the autonomy level for women. In the same manner, there is moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.52$) between the socio-economic comparison index and the decision-making of women from better socio-economic background. Cultural norms and gender expectations, and barriers and empowerment factors have strong negative correlations respectively ($r = -0.64$ and $r = -0.71$), indicating that the structures and the patriarchy significantly limit women's decision making power (Fabian & Afrizal, 2025). Overall, the results show that socio-economic development is a key driver of women empowerment, but that cultural norms and structure remain the ultimate limiting factors for women autonomy.

Table 4.4: Regression Analysis Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error
	0.82	0.67	0.65	0.49

In table 4.4 shows that the regression model has a generally good fit ($R = 0.82$). The R^2 value (0.67) indicates that 67% of the variance in women's decision-making ability is attributable to independent variables, which is statistically significant in the context of social science research. The remaining 33% is explained by other external factors not included in the model (Nguyen & Qaim, 2025).

Table 4.5: Regression Coefficients

Variables	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
Constant	0.91	2.85	0.005
Socio-Economic Factors (SEF)	0.32	5.41	0
Cultural Norms (CNGE)	-0.38	-6.72	0
Socio-Economic Comparison (SECI)	0.27	4.89	0
Barriers & Empowerment Factors (BEF)	-0.44	-7.95	0

In table 4.5 shows that for all independent variables, $p < 0.001$ is significant, meaning that all of the independent variables predict the decision making power of women. Socio-economic factors are positively and significantly associated with women's involvement in decision making in the house ($\beta = 0.32$) which indicated that better education, income, and employment level advances women's participation in household decision making. Likewise, the socio-economic comparison index ($\beta = 0.27$) shows that women in higher income households have

higher levels of autonomy. By contrast, cultural norms and gender expectations ($\beta = -0.38$) and barriers and empowerment factors ($\beta = -0.44$) illustrate important negative correlated relationships, suggesting that patriarchy, financial dependency, social pressure and restricted mobility all have important impacts on women's empowerment in decision-making. Barriers and empowerment factors are the strongest negative predictors, among all predictors, barriers and empowerment factors are the strongest negative influence. In general, the regression analysis revealed that socio-economic empowerment is found as a facilitating factor in increasing women autonomy while the obstacles that most influence the autonomy of women are cultural and structural (Ochieng, 2023). H₁: The influence of socioeconomic factors (education, income, and employment) on women's decision-making ability is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.32$, $r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). Educated and financially independent women are more involved in household decision-making, but their ability remains, to some extent, limited by cultural norms. Hypothesis 1 was accepted. H₂: Women's decision-making ability is negatively affected by cultural norms and gender expectations ($\beta = -0.38$, $r = -0.64$, $p < 0.001$). Women are largely restricted in household matters due to patriarchal values and roles. Hypothesis 2 was accepted. H₃: Women's decision-making ability varies significantly with income level ($\beta = 0.27$, $r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$). Women in wealthier households are more independent than women in lower-income households. The third hypothesis was accepted. H₄: Women's decision-making ability is negatively affected by social, cultural, and economic constraints ($\beta = -0.44$, $r = -0.71$, $p = 0.001$). The strongest of these constraints are financial dependency and limited mobility. The fourth hypothesis was accepted.

Conclusion

The study concludes that socio-economic status and cultural values together with structural separations greatly affect women decision making situation in case of Faisalabad. Women's autonomy is enhanced through their education, jobs and income but these are not enough to challenge traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms. Traditional norms, patriarchal power relationships, economic dependence, lack of education, and social norms are significant barriers for women's involvement in the household and community decision-making process. Women in nuclear families and relatively high income groups are relatively more empowered in terms of freedom of decision making than their counterparts in joint families and low income groups; but cultural norms still exert influences over economically strong women in nuclear families. The report underscores the need for social and cultural change to attain meaningful gender equality and increased women's participation in decision making in addition to economic development for empowering women.

Suggestions and Recommendations

The study recommends to empower the women in making decisions by accelerating their access to education and economic empowerment, and awareness programs. To improve women's independence, literacy, skills building, employment and entrepreneurship and financial inclusion should be promoted among women. To break down gender norms in the decisions of the household and society, community-based activities, media communications and government policies are required. Family level interventions, NGO involvement and development of gender equality knowledge and skills within institutions can facilitate the change in gender attitudes and society.

Future Direction

Further research is needed on the role of women decision makers using more expansive geographic research fields, greater samples and diversified sample types, as well as a mixed-method design to better understand the experiences and challenges faced by women. A longitudinal study is suggested for investigating any changes in women's autonomy over time. In addition, the future implications of empowerment dimensions like role of men in women empowerment, empowerment through the use of digital empowerment, regional variations and

impact of Gender Equality policies of Government and International Organisations should also be investigated.

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