

The Status of Women: Case Study of Anun Village of Solan District, Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT: Present study emphasizes the impact of decision-making authority and social, economic, political aspects of equality on the status of rural women in households. This study aims to explore the links between autonomy and equal status of women in domestic conditions and the impact of education or working status of women in joint or nuclear families. Data were collected through a self-designed schedule and interview method from thirty respondents who were married women aged above twenty years. In this study, it is observed that women who have high status in family and society have more access to resources- education, employment, and autonomy and vice versa. The higher status leads to low gender disparity and high gender equality in families and society.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages, the image of an ideal woman is portrayed through different epics, plays, stories that narrate different positions and roles of women to achieve higher status in their family and society. Either the *Sita of Ramayana* or the *Savitri of Mahabharata*; women are expected to perform moral duties towards their husbands and in-laws to be an epitome of perfection. The study and research on the position and role of women in different spheres are embedded in different disciplines like anthropology, sociology and gender studies, etc. Ralph Linton (1936) described the dynamic aspect of status influenced by position and role. He defined “A position in a particular pattern” as status which is affected by the norms of behaviour under different conditions. When this position is obtained by birth, it reflects the ascribed status of an individual and when an individual attains a position by performing duties and roles controlled by a set of circumstances is known as achieved status (Lang, 1956). A set of duties and roles portraying a status of an individual in different societies is linked

to gender. Gender is a social construct formed by a society based upon masculine and feminine characteristics of an individual with associated values, traits, and statuses (Blackstone, 2003). Anthropologists are endeavouring to uncover the factors responsible for this distinction to study the attached role to gender.

The structure of South-Asian societies is generally patriarchal characterized by patrilocal residence. The hierarchy and inheritance of authority are male dominating which gives foremost position to men (Jejeebhoy and Sathar, 2001). The traditional set of a family assign duties and roles to men and women based upon the beliefs and values embedded in Indian society. Women are often seen as a nurturer who cook food, do chores and take care of their children within the dimension of a house whereas men mostly work outside the house to financially support their family. This creates a conventional image of both genders to perform a certain set of roles in society. It bounds women within a territory and requires strenuous efforts to escape these boundaries (Blackstone, 2003). It creates dual responsibility on a woman’s shoulders

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to perform both roles when she works outside her house. The lack of opportunities, restricted cultural norms, the gender wage gap, and lack of safety measures are a few factors responsible for decreasing women's participation in the workforce (Ratho, 2020). According to the International labour organization, the participation of women in the workforce is only 19.96% in 2020 (World Bank, 2022). The trend of low participation reflects the present conditions of Indian society which is still functioning on a traditional set of norms attached to gender. It creates an invisible hindrance in the growth of women in a society whose roots are embedded in the domestic environment. To understand the pattern of applied external forces of this hindrance, it is important to analyse the internal core of it that lies within households.

The woman is considered as the epicentre of a house from where the formation of different bonds takes place and her responsibility to perform different roles towards each bond arises. The status of a woman within the household depends upon these roles and duties performed by her. The purpose of a current research paper is to study the status of women in households influenced by two parameters-equality and autonomy. The two parameters which are used to analyse the status of women in the household are defined below-

Equality

Pateman (1970) defined equality as equal access to opportunities to participate in the social, economic, and social sphere of society with no illicit and unjustifiable criteria inflicted on a person that hinders his chance to compete and participate (Caprioli, 2000). The quality of being fair and impartial is termed as equity and the state of being the same in quantity, size, degree value, or status is termed as equality. Both of these terms are used interchangeably in many places. Men and women are both born equally and share the grace of nature equally but distinctions made by society have created liabilities for women (Balasubramanian, 2013). There are various parameters like gender, race, age, ethnicity, occupation, class, education which are used to access and compare dimensions of equality (Young, 2001). The presence of aspects of equality is universal but no universal definition is present which will cover all aspects of

equality.

Autonomy

The decision-making ability about the private concern of an individual based upon social, technical, and psychological factors is termed as autonomy (Dyson and Moore, 1983). The term is also interchangeably used as 'authority', 'marital authority pattern', 'decision making power', and power structure by different scholars to understand the women's position and relation in a household (Chakrabarti, 2019). Autonomy is closely associated with status in the household. In family, it is a set of complex positions dependent upon the family structure, kinship pattern, intergeneration relationships (Chakrabarti, 2019). The status of women changes based upon the needs and demands fulfilled by them.

MATERIALS & METHODS

The study was conducted at Anun village of Solan district, Himachal Pradesh. In this area, there were twenty-seven households with a population of 132 persons having 77 males and 55 females (Census of India, 2011). Thirty respondents were selected from this village using primary factors-age and marital status of women and secondary factors- education, type of family, and head of the family. Data were collected through a self-designed schedule by in-depth interview method from 30 respondents. Thematic analysis of data has been done to analyse the status of women in the family. Factors that are primarily used for data collection are discussed as follows:

Age: Mixed populations of thirty married women were taken as respondents with the age of 20 years and above as shown in Figure 1. There were a total of nine categories of respondents. Age-groups of respondents were divided into nine categories with age gap of five years in each category. The maximum number of respondents (seven) was found under the age-group of 25-30 years, followed by four respondents each in the age-groups of 35-40 years, 40-45 years, and 50-55 years. There were three respondents each in the age-groups of 20-25 years and 30-35 years and above sixty years. The minimum number of respondents i. e. one was found in each age-group of 40-45 years and 55-60 years.

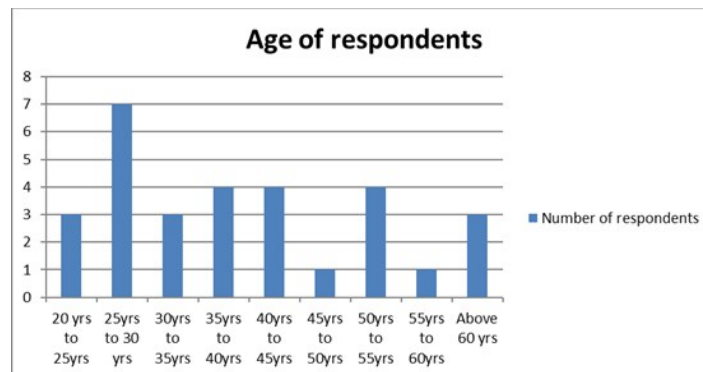


Figure 1: Age of respondents
Source: Fieldwork data

Education and Working Status of Women

Education is an important factor that affects major parts of an individual’s life. It increases the capacity of an individual to make better life choices by accessing information and resources available in their surroundings. It acts as an essential marker in social, economic, and cultural development. In this area, women were primarily involved in household activities due to lack of adequate education institutions, socio-economic instability, and cultural norms which decrease their chances of getting higher education so they were mostly educated up to secondary level i.e. only 4% of respondents had qualified for the higher secondary exam, 34% respondents had qualified matriculation exam and 27% respondents had passed 8th standard. There was low participation of respondents for higher education as only 17% of the sample population was post-graduated and 14% population was graduated. There was only 4% population that had never gone to school. The participation of women in the working sector was depended upon the availability of work opportunities around their surroundings. Lack of opportunity would lead to lower participation of women in the workforce. Only 20% of respondents were working and the remaining 80% of the sample population was indulged in performing household activities.

Type of Family and Head of Family

The smallest unit of society known as the nuclear family is a common family structure in a modern society consisting of one wedded pair and children. It is also categorized into natal (family of orientation)

where an individual is born and conjugal family (family of procreation) where one gets married and has children (Jack, 2015). Due to westernization and urbanization increase in the formation of the nuclear family had emerged; around 56.66% of respondents were living in the nuclear family. A joint family is an extended nuclear family unit of traditional type in which different generations live together. It is either expended vertically or horizontally depending upon the type of members living together (Jack, 2015). There were only 43.34% of respondents live in a joint family. The type of family also affects the power and decision-making authority. In this area, patriarchal family type is prevalent which gives more power to men as compared to women. The head of a family plays the supreme role in autonomy (Chakrabarti, 2019). There were 50% of men who were head in their family and only 16.7% women were playing the role of head of their family. In a joint family, the position was decided by age, gender, hierarchy; mostly male elders were considered as the head of the family and the absence of them shifts the position towards elder women or other male members of a family. 33.3% of in-laws were positioned as the head of a family most prevalent in a joint family as compared to nuclear.

RESULTS

Equality: There are three measures of equality-social, economic, and political which are highly correlated and interdependent but the interrelationship among these measures changes due to different variables acting on it which makes it difficult to trace all aspects of equality (Caprioli, 2000).

The measure of equality is different in the social environment as compared to a domestic environment. The domestic environment in which women reside changes the measuring aspects of equality as a difference in conditions leads to change in variables. Along with social, political, and economic variables along with other variables affecting these variables is also included in this study. The state of being equal in domestic conditions is measured by the following variables-

Social Variable

Participation in self-help groups: The participation in self-help groups and other community-based groups enhances the self-efficacy, self-esteem, and cognizance of an individual. There was 66% participation of women in these groups. Women belonging to the same socio-economic background face similar social constraints and these groups act as a catalyst to overcome the barriers related to social and financial constraints. The remaining sample population (34%) was either financially stable or not aware of the existence of these groups.

Political Variable

Availability of documents: Political variable was analyzed by the availability of documents among the respondents. There were 93% of respondents who had documents (PAN card, Voter ID card, Aadhaar card) that provided identity to these individuals to avail benefits and opportunities in the political sphere of the country. 7% of respondents had no documents showed low participation in political matters.

Economic Variable

Availability of bank account: 73% of respondents had personal accounts whereas 20% of respondents had a joint account. The personal account indicates that they have access to their funds and reserves which can be utilized whenever needed. A joint account indicates that consent is needed to withdraw the funds and the dependency of respondents on their spouses. The remaining 7% of the population with no account were either elderly population dependent upon other members of a family or the migrant workers.

Other Variables

Incident and violence: Around 23.3% of women had gone through incidents that had changed their life. One of the respondents shared her personal life experience that she had lost her adult son and her husband was a deaf and dumb person. The early demise of her son and disabled husband had badly affected her life. She had to fulfil all the social and financial responsibilities of her family. It had created a huge impact on her social and personal life. Another respondent also experienced a traumatic incident in her life. She was harassed by her in-laws because of not having a child. Her in-laws wanted their son to remarry and leave her alone. This had created a huge barrier in her social life. The violence rate experienced by women was approximately 6.66% found. It was majorly linked to dowry cases and financial problems.

Respect regarding education and working status: Around 60% of respondents believed that if they were educated, they would get more respect in their family and society whereas 40% of women believed that it would only affect their social life. Around 56.66% of respondents believed that their working status did not affect their personal and social life. 43.34% of respondents considered that if they were working they would have achieved a better social status.

Autonomy: Many attributes are collectively responsible for the decision-making capacity of an individual but a few play key roles like age, family structure, education, and working status of women. These are the strongest attributes that affect the associated outcomes in the developing country (Acharya *et al.*, 2010). This section includes twofold studies of the decision-making ability of respondents related to the budget of daily household's needs, expenditure, investment, and purchasing valuables along with authority to make decisions of personal life.

Decisions Related to Household's Budget

The decision related to the budget of daily household's needs showed a major involvement in the decision-making process of women as 53% of the decision was taken by respondents alone. This percentage of respondents was free from the influence

of the education or working status of women. The other three factors (age and family type and head of a family) were affecting it. Most women in this stratum were elder women or women belonging to nuclear families. Age has a direct influence on this heterogenous construct of decision-making as autonomy increases with increasing age. Newly married women in a joint family are expected to indulge in more household activities rather than decision making. Respondents were either the head of a family or belonged to the nuclear family which gave them the privilege to make decisions solely. 30% of respondents took mutual decisions and their

responses were affected by three factors-education, working status, and the nuclear family. Mutual consent decreases the stress in a relationship and increases mutual understanding. The decision was taken mutually mostly when a couple was educated, working, and belonged to a nuclear family. Only 3.4% of husbands solely decided on a budget because they were head of the family either in nuclear or joint. 13.6% of decisions of the budget were taken by in-laws because of the joint structure of family and presence of elders. The factors affecting the decision-making ability of respondents related to the household's budget are represented in table 1 below-

TABLE 1
Factors affecting the decisions related to the household's budget

Decision-making authority (percentage)	Age	Education	Working Status	Joint Family	Nuclear Family	Head of a family
Respondent (53.0%)	✓			✓	✓	✓
Mutual (30.0%)		✓	✓		✓	
Husband (3.4%)				✓	✓	✓
In-laws (13.6%)	✓			✓		✓

Source: Fieldwork data

The Decisions Related to Important Expenditure, Investment and Purchasing Valuables

The participation of women was decreased when decisions were related to expenditure, investment, and purchasing valuables. Only 20% of women acted as decision-making authorities related to this important aspect of spending. This 20% of respondents were either elderly women of a joint family who had control over resources or educated or working women of a nuclear family. The percentage (50%) of mutual decision-making authority was increased as the

involvement of the husband increased. Mutual decisions were only taken in the educated and working nuclear family as it gave them equal priority to both genders. The patrilocal residents gave privilege to men to make decisions either in a joint family or nuclear family but the percentage of this measure was only 20%. 10% decision-making authority was in-laws which reflected the joint family structure. Factors affecting the decisions making ability related to important expenditure, investment, and purchasing valuables are represented in table 2.

TABLE 2
Factors affecting the decision related to important expenditure, investment, and purchasing valuables

Decision-making authority (percentage)	Age	Education	Working status	Joint family	Nuclear family	Head of a family
Respondent(20%)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mutual(50%)		✓	✓		✓	
Husband(20%)				✓	✓	✓
In-laws(10%)	✓			✓		✓

Source: Fieldwork data

Personal Life Decisions and Decisions Related to Husband's Life

Women are always entangled in a network of relations that increases their responsibility to perform duties towards other members of the house and decreases the time for her grooming. Personal grooming helps an individual for personal growth that increases work efficiency. The decision related to her personal life reflects her liberty free from restrictions imposed by others. Only 33.33% of women took their decisions independently related to their grooming, personal spending, and visiting her natal home, etc. whereas 66.67% of respondents took permission from their husbands to make personal life decisions.

To make a better relationship, partners must share and involve in difficult times to make decisions. Every individual faces different life problems in different aspects of life. The circle of decision-making generally overlaps in a relationship which reduces the individual's liberty to make independent decisions. The degree to which the circle overlaps depends on different individuals. 83.34% of respondents participated in their husband's life while making the decision related to his life. Their husbands usually share personal life problems which reduce the burden and increase the decision-making capacity. Only 16.66% of respondents did not get involved in their husband's life problems which showed the gap in a stable relationship.

DISCUSSION

In the current study, the achieved status of women in domestic conditions portrays the current scenario of Indian rural households. The parameters used to measure this status reflect equality that a woman gains through her position and decision-making ability. In a traditional set of families, women were not only engaged in household chores but also were not allowed to participate in any activity outside the house. With the changing trend of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and gentrification, the traditional set of family structures has changed. The high percentage of social and political variables reflects the changing position of women in modern society. The factors: age, working status, type of family, and head of the family are not affecting these variables shows these variables are free from

limitations of these factors. One does not require a certain age, labour participation to be able to move from one's boundaries. Economic variable shows the financial independence to access her money whenever it is required. The working status of women operates on this variable as if a woman is working she will have more access to economic resources. Women's participation in the decision-making process related to social, economic, and political decisions of household activities is directly proportional to the high status of women in the family. Higher the status of women in the family will result in more participation in domestic and social duties. It will not only reduce the gender disparity but also reduce the barriers to personal growth.

The higher participation of respondents in the decision-making process related to the budget of household's needs as compared to other spending reflects the status of women in her domestic environment. The education and working status of women are two main factors that are responsible for more participation of respondents in the decision-making process related to important investment and spending of income in the family. Lack of education and employment will lead to low participation. Educated and working women enjoy more respect and participation as compared to non-working and uneducated women. It has been observed by responses of respondents as 60% believed education plays a key role in achieving higher status in their family and society. Uneducated and unemployed respondents wanted their daughter to achieve higher education. 43.34% of respondents accepted that employment not merely provides financial support to a person but also gives higher family status. Thus, from this study and similar studies, it has been concluded that in South Asian society, the education and working status of women play a key role in autonomy and provide more opportunities to increase gender equality within a household and outside the house (Acharya *et al.*, 2010).

Age and type of family also play a supreme role in the decision-making process. Educated and working women in the nuclear family enjoy more liberty as compared to uneducated and unemployed women. In a joint family, age, gender and hierarchy control all factors in the domestic environment which lead to

equal rights to make decisions related to personal empowerment. Uneducated elder women or mothers-in-law have more rights to make important decisions as compared to educated daughter-in-law. The Head of the family has more control over resources as compared to other members. Female-headed households have more liberty to access financial and social resources as compared to male-headed households but societies of northern and central states have a low percentage of autonomy as compared to southern and north-eastern states (Chakrabarti, 2019). The rate of women's participation in decision-making to raise their status in family and society can be increased by education and employment.

Violence is one of the major factors that affect, the physical, social, mental, and reproductive health of women. According to World Health Organization, one of three women has been subjected to physical and sexual violence by their sexual partner and non-partner (W.H.O, 2021). Respondents (6.66%) who had been subjected to physical and mental violence did not want to share and report this because of socio-cultural norms, financial dependence upon their partner, low education, and unemployment. According to World Health Organization, community norms of having higher status to men and low status to women, low level of education, gender equality, and paid employment are high-risk factors of violence (W.H.O, 2021). These factors should be annihilated to raise women's status in family and society.

Gender is a fundamental dimension of society that is used to measure the degree of power and equality that an individual can access. Equality cannot be achieved by working on one gender only; both genders have to work equally to improve conditions of the domestic and social environment. Access to material, human and intellectual resources gives more power and control to achieve equality in society. Education, employment, and equal access to resources are a few factors that raise the degree of equality of gender.

CONCLUSIONS

The status of women in households of Anun village portrays the current scenario of rural villages of India. Women are making strenuous efforts to uplift

their status in the family but are entrapped in responsibilities to perform roles and duties attached to their gender. Cultural norms, social stigmas, the inadequacy of higher education, and lack of resources are among a few factors that create a hindrance in their personal growth. Education, employment, moral support by their spouses and other family members are among a few factors that enhance their social, financial, and economic growth. An increase in the autonomy of a woman in domestic conditions is one of the key factors to strengthen her position in the household. Education, employment, and equal access to resources are three effective agents of empowerment. In remote and rural villages which consist of a major part of the country, women are not aware of these important agents that improve their personal and social life. To increase the participation of women in the workforce, it is firstly important to improve domestic conditions around them. Specifically designed awareness and empowerment programmed schemes are required that create more opportunities around them to uplift their status in society.

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