

Role of women in decision making: a case study of Pakhtuns of Tehkal, Peshawar, Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper discusses women's decision-making role in the affluent patriarchal households of Pakhtuns. The patriarchy is popularly believed to be an impediment for women to participate in decision-making at the household level. The study analyses the participation of women in decision-making related to children's spouse selection, education and health, and family planning. The study also focused on women's role in decision-making related to household expenditure and the purchase of household items and immovable property. The study was qualitative, and participant observation and in-depth interviews were used as data collection tools. The study found that women's age, education, marital status, marriage duration, and family structure determine women's decision-making. The study reveals that despite the patriarchal system of households in affluent Pakhtun households, women participated in the decisions making. They participated in decision-making related to children's health, education, and selection of the spouse for their children. Women had a say in family planning. They also participated in the decisions related to household expenditure and purchasing household items. Participation of women in decisions related to the purchase of immovable items was limited.

Keywords: decision making, women's decision making, patriarchy, women empowerment, Pakhtun households, family planning, household expenditure, power dynamics.

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1. Introduction

Patriarchy is defined by a number of social scientists. Various definitions of patriarchy are focused on the different aspects of the concept. For example, Walby (1990, p.20) explains patriarchy as a system in which men are dominant and it oppresses women. In her book *"Theorizing Patriarchy"* she has given six structures in which patriarchy works and oppresses women. These include State, household, violence, paid work, sexuality, and culture (Walby 1990, p. 21). Patriarchy is a sexual system of power in which the male has the economic privilege and possesses superior power Eisenstein (1979, p. 17). Sultana (2012, p.1) defines patriarchy as a system which subordinates and dominates women, and it is a system of power dynamics in which men in both public and private sphere are prioritized. Patriarchy is the crucial impediment to women's progress and development. Lerner (1986, p.3) discusses patriarchy as a social organization in which men dominate women and selfishly exploit them. The question here is that if it is too evil of a system for women why then they strive to preserve it? Blaming patriarchy for all the evils faced by women, is labelling all men as evil. Millet (1977, p. 36) defines patriarchy as a system in which males dominates females and elders dominates young. This definition is two folded. It not only reflects the relationship of male and female but also states that in patriarchy, the younger are dominated by their elders. Lerner (1986, p. 217) claims that patriarchy as a system has been derived from the Greek and Roman law. Lerner defines patriarchy as a system in which male of the household has power over the female and male dependent members of the family. Morrissey (2003, p. 24) explains patriarchy as a relation of governance presided over by a father. Ferguson (1999, p. 1048) has also identified patriarchy as the rule of father.

According to Goldberg (1979) patriarchy is any system of social, economic, political, or religious organization in which most of the upper positions are occupied by men. Walby (1990, p. 24) argues that the system of patriarchy oppresses and exploits women. The system is considered to be characterized with oppression by various scholars. This is debatable. Firstly, the power in patriarchy is not always gendered. Power also comes with age and seniority. Patriarchy does not only magnify engendered hierarchy. Elder women can also have influential status and exert power over other men and other women. Secondly, women are portrayed as victims of patriarchy. There are differences amongst women and not all are victims and oppressed. They do have power according to their socio-economic status. We cannot simply argue that women have limited agency and are victims of patriarchal structures whether religious, economic, political, or social. At certain time, women can be free from subordination. Women navigate and negotiate their position in patriarchy. Women use patriarchy to secure a privileged position. They make room in private and public sphere of life. To be more specific, a woman who is subordinated by her husband exercises control over her son and daughter in-law (Kandiyoti, 1988). Patriarchy reproduces itself through relationships. In such a system, women manipulate their position to secure privilege so that the patriarchal order seems tolerable. Woman is not simply subordinated in patriarchy, but she also dominates in various circumstances. Women learn to accommodate themselves in patriarchy by securing a certain status. The patriarchal structure can only function with the cooperation of women (Lerner, 1986). They are also perpetrators of patriarchy.

The status of women is not static. It is dynamic and a relative phenomenon. It alters with age and with the change in her social status from being a daughter and sister to wife and mother. A girl might not take decision for herself but being a mother, she receives a glorified status. She

has authority over many of the decisions related to the household and family. When she ages, she holds a significant amount of power which she exercises over her family members (Jamal, 2015, p. 19). A Pakhtun woman is not always passive (Mann, 2005, p.3). There are stereotypes about Pakhtun men that they treat their women poorly and they suffer hardships due to the patriarchal family structure. When talked over, Pakhtun women are imagined as oppressed and weak. Pakhtun women are believed to be imperiled by patriarchy (Alam, 2012). In this century, these descriptions about women need to be reformed. Media has been slow regarding the changing status of Pakhtun women.

The status of the Pakhtun women of affluent households is high. Women of high-income families do not want any change in their status among Pakhtun. Compared to non-Pakhtun women in Pakistan, majority of Pakhtun women agree that they are entitled to the same rights as men in the country. Pakhtun women as compared to non-Pakhtun women of Pakistan are more confident about their rights of protection, healthcare, and decisions regarding reproductive health. They have a greater control over the household purchases and savings (Pessala, 2012). At the present, a good number of Pakhtun women are receiving their share in inheritance and their economic needs are fulfilled by the cultural procedure. Pakhtun women are also given education and this opportunity is regulated by the cultural values whether informal or formal. Among Pakhtun there is no discrimination in treatment of illness of men and women in the present-day. Pakhtun women equally participate in decision making (Khan, 2013. p. 29). According to Alam (2012), the main role of women in Pakhtun society is to do household chores, home management, participation in ceremonial events and female oriented jobs. Pakhtun women also play an important role in the decision making related to the health care, budget management at home, family planning, income keeping and spending and share suggestions in every matter related to the family.

The population under study is Pakhtun and they maintain their cohesion through kinship. Status of women and the kinship structure of the research population are inseparable. Despite the existence of the formal State, they depend on each other for the protection of their social, economic, and political interest. Patriarchy is an alternative mechanism of governance among Arbabs. Being patriarchal does not mean that all the activities and opportunities of women are controlled by men only. Due to the prevalence of patrilocal¹ pattern of residence and joint family system among the research population, the opportunities provided to married women are also controlled by other women in their in-laws particularly mother-in-law. Same is noted by Habiba et al (2016, p. 212) that the resident women in patrilocal households use power to subjugate the new married women. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of women in the decision making in patriarchal households. It discusses various factors that are related to women which effects decision making.

2. Literature review

Power dynamics of a household are greatly influenced by sex-role preference, religious and cultural ideologies, and resources (Kaur, 2007, p. 263; Khattak et al., 2020). Power in a household can only be identified after a series of decisions are made (Dahl, 1951). The best way to determine which group or individual has great power is to look for who makes more decisions (Polsby, 1963, p. 4). Bachrach and Baratz (1963) also support that series of decisions reflect the power dynamics. Blood (1969) identifies two kinds of power in marital relationship. The power between the spouses may be symmetrical or asymmetrical. Equality exists when

spouses make equal number of decisions or share decision making (syncretic power). When inequality exists, decision is taken by one spouse (autonomic power). Herbst's (1952) typology of marital power includes four categories. The categories are husband dominant, wife dominant, syncretic and autonomic power. When a decision is made by husband or wife, the husband/wife dominant is categorized as autocratic. Syncretic power exists when decisions are made mutually by the spouses (Cromwell & Olson, 1975, p. 23). Power of individual also reflects their domination in particular sphere. Spouses also make individual decisions in areas of their expertise, according to their sex-role definition of the household (Cromwell & Olson, 1975). Oakley (1974) as cited in Kaur (2011) suggests that the decision-making power in low-status activity and high-status activity cannot be taken equally. In contrast, Scanzoni & Szinovacz (1980) suggest that one must tend to obscure what is actually happening in order to understand power dynamics as a global phenomenon. Power should not be looked in global terms because it is specific to situation (Paolucci et. al, 1977; Brinkerhoff & Lupri, 1978; Scanzoni, 1979 & Scanzoni & Szinovacz, 1980).

Heath (1976) argues that each spouse has his/her own sphere of authority in which he/she has control. In household, husband and wife have certain sphere of influence. The power relation between husband and wife is part of a larger kinship group which includes children and other relatives. The decision made by any of the spouse may be directed by any other member of the household. The decision considered to be significant in one culture may not be of a value in another culture (Rodman, 1972. p. 50-51). Furthermore, the role of men and women in decision making is determined by the resources they have. The resources available may have an impact on the marital power of either or both the spouses. However, the resources do not have a similar role in every culture. The role of resources in marital power is discussed below.

2.1 Theory of resources in cultural context and relative status of husband and wife

The theory of resources (Dahl, 1957) explains that "the greater the resources, the greater one's power". The resources include age, occupation, education, income etc. Husbands have relatively more age, income, education, and high-status occupation than the wives, therefore husband have more power in decision making. Studies have been conducted in U.S.A, Belgium, France, Ghana, Denmark to look for the relationship between resources and marital power. The "theory of resources" was reasonably acceptable for the communities in German and U.S.A. data but less adequate for the Denmark and France.

Bold and Wolf (1960) found that in the U.S.A, husband's power increased with the increase in his income, education, and occupational status. The husbands would use these resources to gain power in decision making. Husband's power in decision making also increases when the wife depends on him. When the wife works and supplies valued resources to the family, she would gain power in decision making. While studying German families, Konig (1957) also found the association of resources and power in decision making. Michel (1967) was also of the same opinion that in France, the marital power and resources has a positive association. Michel (1967) cautioned that occupational and educational status may have different significance in less developed countries.

Resources may play a positive role in the distribution of power in industrial societies. On the other hand, these resources may have a negative correlation with husband's power in less developed countries (Rodman, 1972. p. 57). The resources are not only variables in power

structure but also in social structure. It may represent likelihood of learning attitudes that are favourable towards equal distribution of power between spouses. For example, in Greece and Yugoslavia, the more educated the man, the likelier he is to grant his wife with more power, despite the patriarchal culture (Serfilios-Rothschild, 1967). The resources, especially education plays an important role in learning egalitarian behaviour rather than a determinant of power in decision making. So, there are two conflicting tendencies, in one the higher status of man increases his power and in the other it decreases his marital power.

On the basis of marital power Rodman (1972) has given four stages of societies.

- a) Patriarchy: In this stage there is a high level of paternal authority and men hold the formal position of authority in marriage.
- b) Modified patriarchy: The second stage is that of modified patriarchy in which the power of man is ascribed. Men have power by virtue of being men. The worth of a man is not evaluated in terms of his earning capacity. The low-income man does not lose authority. This stage is modified by equalitarian norms at the upper strata of society. Men with high income and education have equalitarian marital patterns which modifies the patriarchal structure.
- c) Transitional equalitarianism: At this stage, patriarchal norms are replaced by equalitarian family norms and paternal authority is related to social class. In this stage, status of husband is positively correlated to husband's marital power.
- d) Equalitarianism: This stage is characterized with high level of sharing of power between husband and wife. This type of society has developed social welfare policies that provide strong support to the family at all social levels.

Pakhtun society suggests that the power will always be in the hands of husbands. The real structure of marital power also works side by side to the ideal structure. In Pakhtun society both patriarchy and modified patriarchy are functional. In the patriarchal structure of Pakhtun society, men do not lose their authority if they have fewer resources. Men hold marital power despite of having less income job or less education. Men will retain their political status within household in patriarchy. Despite the fewer resources, the man is responsible for all the needs of the family. The women depend on men. This dependency adheres both men and women to patriarchy. Being patriarchal does not mean that women are over a barrel and have no say in decision making at household level. In the upper economic strata of Pakhtun society, when the education and income levels of a man are high, he delegates power to wife. The wife plays her role within the normative framework of decision making.

The normative framework of decision making at household level has two sub-structures, the ideal structure of a patriarchal family and the real structure. The ideal structure suggests that the power of decision making is always in the hands of husbands. Whereas in real practice, the decision making can depend on various factors, like the love of husband for his wife, socio-economic status of the family and personality dominance of wife has a significant influence on the decision making in a household. The decision making in Pakhtun society may be syncretic or autocratic.

3. Research methodology

The status, rights, behaviours, personal experiences, beliefs, rituals, and values are evaluated

preferably by qualitative methods by anthropologists, some of the examples are Abu-Lughod, 1993; Ahmed, 1980; Barth, 1959; Boas, 1975; Chagnon, 1996; Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Friedl, 1974; Greetz, 1972; Heider, 1996; Keiser, 1997; Lindholm, 1982 and Malinowski, 1922. This study was also qualitative in nature. It is a descriptive analysis of the status of affluent Arbab women in patriarchal structure of the society. For data collection, in-depth interview and participant observation was used.

In-depth interviews were used for data collection. For this research, seventy respondents were selected from the resourceful households through purposive sampling for the in-depth interview. Purposive sampling was used as the study was not intended to make any generalizations. Thirty-five women and thirty-five men were interviewed about the participation of women in decision making at household level. The interviews were recorded and were transcribed non-vertimbly. Participant observation was also used in conjunction with in-depth interview method. A day was spent with all respondents at their house. The researcher also participated in various events during the study. The data collected through in-depth interviews was verified through participant observation. It fortified the data. The observations were noted in a daily diary.

Socio-economic survey was also conducted to gather data about the social, political, and economic aspect of the research area. The socio-economic survey form was used to gather information about the types of family, practice of marriage forms, spouse selection, qualification and occupation of individuals, income and income sources of the households, health practices, facilities available to women, participation of women in decision making etc. The survey form also identified divorced and widowed women. This information aided to examine the social and economic status of such women. This survey was conducted in all the households of Arbab who resided in Town III. The data was valuable to identify the resourceful households, which was the main criterion for the selection of respondents for in-depth interview. The survey helped to fortify the study.

To understand the status of women in the patriarchal structure, the research was conducted among the Arbabs of Tehkal Bala of Peshawar city, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (hereafter KP). Arbabs believe themselves to be descendant of Arbab Abdur-Rehman who migrated from Afghanistan and settled in Tehkal Bala of Peshawar. Arbabs reside in the village Tehkal Bala, on main University Road and some on Warsak road and in Hayatabad. Most of them were residents of areas which constitute Town-III, one of the four administrative towns. Therefore, Town-III was selected as the universe of the study.

4. Discussion on the factors associated with the role of women in decision making

Among Arbab, women of the household play a vital role in the decision making of the household. In this research participation of women in decision making related to children's matter, household expenditure, purchasing of household items, property and family planning was explored. The study finds that women played an important role in the decision making related to children. The data from the in-depth interviews and the survey suggests that 100% women played their role in the decisions related to their children. Women played a significant role in the selection of spouse for their son, brothers, and grandson. Women also played a significant role in deciding the school for their children. They also had a great role in the medical treatment of their children. Mothers play an important role in the vaccination of their

children. The refusal for polio drops was also mostly from their mother and grandmother side. According to mothers, they were mostly at home so they would not allow their children to take the drops. For other vaccinations, mother had been quite regular.

While purchasing for household items elder women has the most say as compared to younger women. The decision for household items like furniture, curtains, crockery was either wife dominant or syncretic. Appliances that were related to kitchen were also purchased after syncretic decisions. House expenditures were mostly syncretic. Syncretic in a sense, that the husband would give money to the wife, and she would decide how to allocate the amount. Women also play a significant role in the decision related to family planning. According to the data collected through in-depth interviews the decision related to number of children and the gap between children were either syncretic or wife dominant. There were only two cases in which the decision was husband dominant. The decision making related to purchasing, selling, and renting of property was husband dominant in most cases. The dominance of husbands is because women take least interest due to their lack of knowledge about property. Decision making for purchasing electronics like television, music systems, and computers were also husbands dominant. The power structure in population under study was found to be a combination of syncretic and autocratic.

The role of women in decision making is one of the potential parameters to measure women's autonomy and political status (Bilal & Ahmad, 2018). The data from the interviews and survey suggest that there were various factors that were related to the women's role in decision making at household. Women of the research population played a vital role in decision making that were related to household expenditure, purchasing of household item, women's and children's health, children's education, and spouse selection for sons. This section discusses the potential indicators that influenced the role of women in decision making.

Decision making ability of the women is largely affected by education. The power of a woman increases in decision making with the increase in her education, while it causes a decrease in her husband's power (Jan, 2004). During the study of Taiwan, Xu and Lai (2002) found a positive association between women's education and her role in decision making at household level. Sujatha and Reddy (2009) linked women's education with greater autonomy in their decision-making related to major household purchases in India. Similarly, Chanda et al. (2012) found that in Bangladesh, women's power in decisions related to household purchases increased with education. Oropesa (1997) reported that in Mexico, education was a significant variable for the increase of wives' power and had an equal say in decisions.

According to the respondents of this study, education played a vital role in the participation of women in decision making. Education had brought a positive change by raising their status and autonomy. It enabled them for better upbringing of children and made them key participants in the decisions related to their children. According to the respondents, educated mothers had more say in the health and education of their children. Women who had higher degrees had more say in family planning. They were regularly consulted for household matters. They had full authority over purchasing household items.

The education of husbands was also related to the women's role in decision making. The power of husbands decreased with the increase of their education. The wives of husbands with higher

level of education had more participation in decision making than the wives of the husband with lower level of education.

Age is an important factor in determining women's role in decision making at household level. As people gain knowledge and experience with age, it guides their ability of decision making. With increase in age, the women had a say in all the important matters of the household. Elderly women were observed to have participation in decisions that were related to property and land. Women had a greater autonomy in selection of spouse for their sons. Without mother's consent, son could not marry the girl of his own choice. As compared to younger married women, older women had a greater say in household expenditure and purchasing of items for the household. The elder women also distributed the household work among the women of the household. It was the responsibility of the mother-in-law to decide what to give as *adal-badal* in *kha-bada*. It was mostly the mother-in-law who would decide that with whom the daughter-in-law should do *kha-bada*.

This study found that marital status of a woman had influence on her role in decision making. Married women had a greater autonomy than unmarried women. Married women had greater involvement in their parental family decisions as compared to their unmarried sisters. Married women were perceived to have greater participation than unmarried women of the same household. However, unmarried women of old age had a significant role in decision making in the household. As compared to married women, widowed women were observed to have more autonomy in decision making. Widowed women with adult children had more involvement in decision making than widowed women with young children.

The family structure has a great impact on the patterns of decision making in household. This study found that in the nuclear family the wife, regardless of her age, had a say in the household matters. In nuclear family women also had a great influence over deciding the number of children they will have. Household items were purchased by the mutual consent of both husband and wife. Whereas in the joint family, the younger married women had lesser involvement in the purchasing of household items. Older women especially, mothers-in-law had authority over the expenditure of the household.

The preference for gendered division of labour among the research population was also an important factor for the participation of women in decision making. Women were the primary decision makers in matters that were related to household items, expenditure, and children. Women were believed to be more expert in decisions relation to the foresaid matters. Men dominated the decisions that were related to the property and land. Therefore, the all the decisions were not ultimately taken by men, women were also part of the decisions that needed their expertise.

The duration of marriage has also played an important role in the process of decision making. It was noted that the power of husbands decreased with the increase in the duration of marriage. The husbands had more marital power in the early years of marriage. With the increase in duration of marriage the wives got considerable amount of power to make decisions at household level.

The role of men and women was also found to be associated with their expertise in an area. As women spent more time at home and with children, they were more likely to be involved in

decision related to these. Mostly women decided what items were needed to be purchased for the household, children, and themselves.

During the fieldwork, I accompanied my respondent Khadija for shopping. Khadija was shifting to her new home in a few days and her daughter was getting married after four months. She picked me from my home. She was accompanied by her driver and a young maid. The maid was there so that she could help us with carrying the shopping bags as Khadija had to buy many items that day. Firstly, we went to buy crockery for her new home and her daughter's dowry. She purchased expensive crockery for her daughter and less expensive for herself. She told that for marriage they have to get expensive items. Though the items would remain in the cupboards for decades and would not be used. After crockery she shopped for electronics. She bought kitchen appliances, washing machine and a vacuum cleaner. She said that women used these items, and they knew that which item is more suitable to buy. She added that other electronic items like television, heaters and geyser would be purchased either by her husband or her son.

Afterward we went to the jeweller shop where she had to order jewellery for her daughter. We selected a set of bangles and a bridal set which included a necklace, earrings, and a head dress. We spent almost eight hours in the bazar and in evening we came to Khadija's home. Her maids and daughter in-law had prepared dinner. While having dinner she recalled when she went to shop bridal dresses for her daughter in-law. She told that when they shopped for son's wedding they do not shop alone. They have to invite sisters, sister in-laws and *chaachi*² and *maami*³. The females would go and select bridal dresses. At times the bride to be also accompanies to choose her wedding dresses.

Khadija said that women play a vital role in decision making at household level. She added that woman's age, marital status, and family pattern had a great role in her status. When she was young and unmarried her parents would not consult her in family matters. It was also true for her brothers when they were young. After getting married, her mother would consult her when she had to buy anything for the household. She was given priority over her unmarried sister. She helped her mother in selection of spouse for her brother. When she got married into a joint family, at her young age she did not have any say in family matters. Her mother in-law would participate in decision making. She told that one of her sisters who lives in a nuclear family participated in decision making from a young age.

Khadija had five children. She and her husband had consensus over the number of children. She said that younger women were more educated than the women of her generation. Her daughters and daughter in-law had more participation in decision making than her at young age. They would actively participate in the matters related to children's education and health. Khadija told that when she conceived her first child, her mother in-law and sister in-law decided the hospital where the new-born would be delivered. After-wards when second and other children were born, she chose the hospital of her own choice.

She also discussed the role of men in decision making at household level. Men of the household were most likely to make decisions related to land, property and purchasing of vehicles. Her widowed mother in-law had participated in decisions related to property matters. She had very less participation. This was because of less knowledge of her regarding the fore said items. She said that she had least interest in these. Though she would be happy if she could own a property,

but management of the property was not considered to be important for her. She told that buying and selling of the property and dealing with tenants were a difficult job. As being a woman, she had less exposure to the public sphere, she considered management of property as men's responsibility. Her eldest married daughter owned a shop which was given on rent to a food chain. Her daughter received the monthly rent but all the dealings with the tenant were done by her son-in-law. The discussion shows that patriarchy does not limit the role of women in decision making at household level. The decision making takes place within its normative framework. Both men and women play their part.

5. Conclusion

It is evident from the study that women were not excluded from decision making at household level. Patriarchy did not limit the role of women in decision making at household level. Age, education, marital status, and family pattern had an influence on the role of women in decision making. Women had power to decide matters that were related to children's health and education. Women also played a significant role in selection of spouse for their sons. Men delegated power to women in decisions in which women were able to make better choices. Women actively participated in the purchase of household items like appliances and furniture. They also had involvement in the decisions related to household expenditure. Their role in decision making related to property was limited. Elder women were more likely than younger women to participate in decisions that were related to property. Owning a property was an element of happiness for the women. Their least participation in property management was not of a discontentment to them.

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Notes:

¹ It is a pattern of marriage in which the married couple lives with or near the parents of the husband.

² Wife of paternal uncle

³ Wife of maternal uncle