



Changing Gender Roles and Decision-Making within Contemporary Indian Families: A Study in the Present Context

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Abstract

The changing socio-economic, educational, and cultural conditions of contemporary India have significantly influenced gender roles and decision-making within families. Traditional Indian families often assigned men the primary responsibility for economic decisions and women the responsibility for domestic and caregiving activities. However, increasing female education, employment, economic participation, urbanisation, and exposure to modern values have contributed to gradual changes in these patterns. The present study examines the transformation of gender roles and the distribution of decision-making power within contemporary Indian families. It focuses on participation in household finances, education and career choices, marriage-related decisions, healthcare, childrearing, and major family matters. The study also explores whether changing roles have resulted in greater gender equality or continue to coexist with traditional expectations. By analysing changing family relationships and power structures, the study seeks to understand the extent and nature of gender transformation in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: Gender Roles, Decision-Making, Indian Families, Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, Family Dynamics, Social Change

1.1 Introduction, Conceptual Framework and Changing Gender Roles

The family is one of the most fundamental social institutions through which individuals learn values, norms, responsibilities, and patterns of social interaction. In the Indian context, family relationships have traditionally been influenced by patriarchal norms, in which gender has played a significant role in determining responsibilities, authority, and access to resources. Traditionally, men have been regarded as the primary economic providers and major decision-makers, whereas women have largely been associated with household management, childcare, care of elderly family members, and other unpaid domestic responsibilities. Such a gender-based division of labour

was not merely a distribution of tasks but also reflected unequal power relations within the family. The authority to make important decisions regarding finances, property, children's education, marriage, and other major family matters was generally concentrated in the hands of men or senior male members. Feminist scholarship has argued that these arrangements are socially constructed rather than naturally determined by biological differences between men and women (Connell, 2009). Thus, gender roles within the family need to be understood as dynamic social arrangements that are shaped by cultural expectations, economic conditions, institutions, and changing patterns of family life.

The concept of gender roles refers to the socially and culturally defined expectations regarding the behaviour, responsibilities, rights, and activities considered appropriate for men and women. These roles are learned through family socialisation and are reinforced through educational institutions, religious and cultural practices, media, and wider social structures. Parsons and Bales (1955), while explaining the traditional family structure, distinguished between instrumental and expressive roles, generally associating the former with men and the latter with women. However, subsequent gender scholarship has questioned such rigid categorisation and emphasised that household responsibilities and authority can be negotiated among family members. Decision-making within the family is particularly important because it reflects the distribution of power, autonomy, and access to resources. Women's participation in decisions concerning household expenditure, children's education, healthcare, employment, marriage, property, and investments can therefore be regarded as an important indicator of their position within the family. Kabeer (1999) associates empowerment with the ability to make strategic life choices, particularly in situations where such choices were previously denied. From this perspective, changing gender roles can be assessed not only through women's participation in paid employment but also through their increasing involvement in significant family decisions. The traditional Indian gender order was closely connected with a clear distinction between productive and reproductive responsibilities. Men were generally expected to participate in income-generating activities outside the home, while women were expected to undertake unpaid domestic and caregiving work. Although this arrangement provided a functional division of responsibilities within many households, it also contributed to the invisibility and undervaluation of women's unpaid labour. The gender division of labour has historically been reinforced by social expectations that define motherhood, caregiving, household management, and emotional support as primarily feminine responsibilities. Even when women enter paid employment, they frequently continue to carry a disproportionate share of domestic work, creating what has often been described as a "double burden" (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Therefore, the transformation of gender roles cannot be understood simply in terms of women entering the labour market; it also requires examination of whether men's responsibilities within the household and women's authority in family decision-making have changed correspondingly.

Contemporary Indian society, however, is experiencing substantial socio-economic and cultural transformations that are reshaping traditional family relationships. Expansion of education, increasing female labour-force participation, urbanisation, technological development, migration, changing consumption patterns, and exposure to global ideas have contributed to changes in expectations surrounding marriage, employment, parenthood, and family responsibilities. Women's educational attainment and participation in paid employment have particularly strengthened their potential for economic independence and greater bargaining power within households. Economic resources can influence an individual's ability to negotiate household decisions, although employment alone does not automatically guarantee equality in family authority (Kabeer, 1999). Similarly, changing aspirations among younger generations have encouraged greater acceptance of shared responsibilities between husbands and wives. At the same time, these changes are uneven and coexist with deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes, meaning that contemporary families may simultaneously display modern practices and traditional expectations.

Education represents one of the most important factors contributing to the transformation of gender roles. Greater access to education has expanded women's awareness of their rights, opportunities, employment possibilities, and capacity for independent decision-making. Education may also influence attitudes towards marriage, fertility, children's education, household responsibilities, and women's participation in public life. Higher educational attainment among women is frequently associated with greater autonomy and participation in household decisions, particularly when education is accompanied by economic opportunities and supportive family environments. However, the relationship between education and empowerment is complex because cultural norms, household structures, and economic dependency can continue to restrict women's autonomy even among educated women. Consequently, the present context requires an examination of not only whether women are educated but also whether their educational achievements translate into greater authority and equality within family life.

Employment and economic participation constitute another major dimension of changing gender relations. Women's participation in paid work can increase their access to income and personal financial resources, thereby strengthening their bargaining position within the household. Economic independence can provide women with greater capacity to participate in decisions related to expenditure, savings, children's education, healthcare, and other important matters. Sen (1999) emphasises the importance of economic opportunities and agency in expanding individual capabilities and freedom. Nevertheless, women's employment does not necessarily eliminate traditional gender expectations. Many employed women continue to perform substantial domestic and caregiving responsibilities after completing their paid work. This indicates that the transformation of gender roles is not simply a movement from dependence to independence but involves an ongoing negotiation over time, labour, authority, and responsibility within the household.

Urbanisation and changing family structures have further contributed to the transformation of family relationships. The expansion of urban employment opportunities, migration, smaller households, and increasing prevalence of nuclear families have altered traditional patterns of intergenerational authority and household organisation. Nuclear households may provide couples with greater autonomy in decision-making, although they may also increase the pressure on women and men to manage domestic responsibilities without extensive support from extended family members. Urban life also exposes individuals to diverse lifestyles, occupational opportunities, communication technologies, and changing social values. At the same time, traditional expectations may continue to influence family practices irrespective of geographical location. Therefore, contemporary Indian families should not be understood as uniformly moving from traditional to modern arrangements. Rather, they represent a complex combination of continuity and change in which gender roles and decision-making patterns are continuously negotiated.

1.2 Transformation of Gender Roles in Contemporary Indian Families

The transformation of gender roles in contemporary Indian families represents one of the significant dimensions of broader social change in India. Traditionally, household responsibilities were organised around a relatively rigid division of labour, with men primarily associated with income generation and women with domestic management, childrearing, and caregiving. However, changing educational opportunities, economic conditions, occupational structures, urbanisation, and cultural aspirations have gradually challenged these conventional arrangements. The boundaries between traditionally defined masculine and feminine responsibilities are becoming increasingly flexible, particularly among younger and educated couples. Men are increasingly expected to contribute to household activities, while women are increasingly participating in paid employment and family-level decision-making. Nevertheless, this transformation is neither uniform nor complete. Traditional expectations continue to influence everyday family practices, resulting in a situation where older and emerging gender roles frequently coexist. Thus, contemporary Indian families can be understood as spaces of both continuity and transformation, where gender roles are continuously negotiated according to economic circumstances, individual aspirations, and social expectations (Connell, 2009; Hochschild & Machung, 2012).

One of the most important factors behind this transformation is the expansion of women's education, employment, and economic independence. Education has expanded women's awareness of opportunities, rights, and possibilities beyond traditionally prescribed domestic roles. It has also contributed to changes in attitudes towards marriage, motherhood, employment, and participation in family decisions. Employment provides women not only with income but also with greater exposure to institutions and social networks outside the household. Economic independence can strengthen women's bargaining capacity and their ability to participate in decisions concerning household expenditure, savings, children's education, healthcare,

employment, and other important matters. Kabeer (1999) argues that access to resources, agency, and achievements are central dimensions of women's empowerment. From this perspective, women's economic participation can contribute to a redistribution of household power, although employment alone cannot automatically ensure equality. Women may earn an income while continuing to perform the majority of unpaid domestic work, demonstrating that economic participation and equality within the household are related but distinct processes.

The increasing participation of women in paid employment has also generated changes in the traditional role of men. In many contemporary households, men are increasingly expected to participate in activities such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, childcare, and caring for elderly family members. Such participation challenges the conventional understanding of domestic work as exclusively women's responsibility. Greater involvement of fathers in childcare is particularly significant because it indicates a movement towards a more shared understanding of parenting. However, the extent of men's participation varies considerably across families and social groups. Hochschild and Machung (2012) observed that women's entry into paid employment does not necessarily lead to an equal redistribution of household labour. Women often continue to undertake a greater proportion of routine domestic responsibilities even when both spouses are employed. Consequently, the transformation of gender roles should not be measured only by men's willingness to "help" at home but by whether domestic and caregiving responsibilities are increasingly understood as shared family responsibilities rather than as fundamentally women's work.

Changing gender roles have also influenced expectations regarding marriage and family life. Marriage in contemporary India is increasingly associated not only with social obligation and family continuity but also with companionship, emotional compatibility, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. Younger generations, particularly those with greater educational and occupational exposure, may increasingly value equality between spouses in matters concerning employment, household expenditure, residence, parenting, and personal aspirations. Women's expectations regarding employment after marriage and men's acceptance of their spouses' professional aspirations have consequently become important dimensions of contemporary marital relationships. At the same time, traditional expectations concerning women's domestic responsibilities, caregiving, motherhood, and adjustment within the marital family continue to influence marital life. This coexistence of changing aspirations and established social norms creates a complex environment in which couples must negotiate responsibilities and expectations rather than simply follow predetermined gender roles.

The transformation of gender roles therefore involves a continuous negotiation between traditional values and modern aspirations. Indian families are not experiencing a complete replacement of traditional norms by modern values; instead, different generations and family members may simultaneously hold contrasting expectations. For example, a family may encourage a daughter or daughter-in-law to pursue higher education and employment while still

expecting her to assume primary responsibility for cooking, childcare, and household management. Similarly, men may support their wives' careers but continue to consider themselves the principal financial decision-makers. Such contradictions demonstrate that social change is often gradual and uneven. Giddens (1992) suggests that modern intimate relationships increasingly involve negotiation, reflexivity, and individual choice. In the Indian context, however, these emerging patterns operate alongside kinship obligations, cultural traditions, and patriarchal expectations. The resulting family structure is therefore characterised by continuous adjustment between collective family values and individual aspirations.

Significant differences can also be observed between rural and urban families. Urban households generally have greater exposure to diverse occupational opportunities, higher educational institutions, modern communication technologies, and changing lifestyles. These conditions may create greater opportunities for women to enter paid employment and participate in household decisions. However, urban residence should not automatically be equated with gender equality. Patriarchal attitudes and unequal domestic responsibilities can remain strong in urban households. Rural families, similarly, cannot be characterised simply as traditional. Rural women have historically contributed substantially to agriculture, animal husbandry, informal employment, and household economies, although much of this work remains unpaid or insufficiently recognised. Consequently, the nature of gender roles may differ between rural and urban settings rather than following a simple traditional-modern divide. The extent of transformation is shaped by education, employment, household income, access to resources, social norms, and local cultural conditions.

Differences are likewise visible between educated and less-educated families. Education can encourage more egalitarian attitudes by increasing awareness, improving employment opportunities, and facilitating exposure to alternative family models. Educated couples may be more likely to discuss household finances, children's education, career decisions, and other important matters jointly. However, education by itself does not guarantee equal gender relations. Socialisation, family background, economic dependence, caste and community norms, and individual attitudes may continue to influence the distribution of authority. A highly educated woman may therefore experience significant domestic responsibilities and limited autonomy, while a less-educated couple may develop relatively cooperative patterns of household decision-making. It is consequently necessary to examine education as one factor among several rather than treating it as an automatic determinant of gender equality.

1.3 Gender and Decision-Making within the Family

Decision-making within the family is an important indicator of the distribution of power, autonomy, and equality between men and women. In the traditional Indian family, important decisions have often been associated with senior male members, particularly in matters involving finances, property, children's education, marriage, and external social relations. Women's participation has frequently been limited to decisions concerning household management and

everyday domestic requirements. However, changing educational and occupational opportunities, increasing economic participation of women, and transformations in family structures have gradually created greater possibilities for women's involvement in decision-making. From a gender perspective, decision-making should not be understood merely as the ability to express an opinion; it also involves having meaningful influence over the final outcome of decisions. Kabeer (1999) conceptualises empowerment through the interconnected dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements, making agency particularly relevant to understanding women's participation in household decisions. Thus, examining who makes decisions, who controls resources, and whose preferences receive greater importance provides a significant basis for assessing changing gender relations within contemporary Indian families.

One of the most common areas in which gender relations become visible is household expenditure and savings. Traditionally, men have often been regarded as the primary financial managers, particularly where they are the principal income earners. Women, despite managing everyday household consumption, may have had limited authority over larger financial decisions. Contemporary family arrangements, however, increasingly involve joint discussions regarding monthly expenditure, savings, children's expenses, insurance, loans, and household purchases. Women's income can strengthen their involvement in such decisions because financial contribution may increase their bargaining position within the household. Nevertheless, the relationship between earning and financial authority is not always direct. A woman may contribute substantially to household income while still having limited control over how that income is utilised. Similarly, women who are not employed in the formal labour market may exercise considerable influence over household expenditure through their role in managing domestic resources. Therefore, financial decision-making needs to be examined in terms of both economic contribution and actual control over resources rather than income alone.

Children's education and career choices constitute another important area of family decision-making. Education has traditionally been influenced by parental authority, with fathers or senior family members frequently exercising greater control over major educational and career decisions. With increasing educational attainment among women, mothers are becoming more actively involved in determining children's schooling, higher education, professional choices, and skill development. Women's close involvement in children's everyday lives may provide them with substantial knowledge of children's academic performance, interests, and aspirations. In dual-earner families, decisions concerning children's education may increasingly be discussed jointly by both parents. However, gendered preferences can continue to influence educational and career choices, particularly where families prioritise different forms of education or occupations for sons and daughters. Consequently, women's participation in educational decisions can serve as an important indicator of their changing authority within the family.

Marriage and reproductive decisions represent particularly significant dimensions of gender and family power. Decisions regarding the timing of marriage, choice of spouse, continuation of

marriage, number of children, spacing between births, and reproductive healthcare have historically been influenced by family traditions and patriarchal expectations. Women's autonomy in these matters is closely associated with their ability to make decisions concerning their own bodies and life trajectories. Sen (1999) emphasises the importance of individual agency and substantive freedom in enabling people to make meaningful choices about their lives. In contemporary India, increasing education, urbanisation, economic independence, and changing attitudes among younger generations have contributed to greater discussion and negotiation between spouses concerning marriage and reproductive choices. Yet, family and community expectations continue to influence these decisions in many settings. The degree to which women can independently or jointly participate in such decisions therefore provides an important measure of gender equality within family relationships.

Healthcare and family welfare decisions also reveal the changing nature of gender relations. Women have traditionally played a central role in caring for children, elderly family members, and sick household members, yet their own healthcare decisions may sometimes remain dependent upon other family members. Contemporary families increasingly recognise the importance of women's healthcare, including reproductive health, maternal care, mental well-being, and preventive healthcare. Decisions concerning medical treatment, expenditure on healthcare, selection of healthcare providers, and family welfare programmes may be made jointly by spouses or by women themselves. However, financial dependence, mobility restrictions, lack of information, and traditional expectations can limit women's autonomy, especially in economically vulnerable households. Women's participation in healthcare decisions should therefore be considered not only in terms of whether they are consulted but also whether they possess the practical ability and financial resources to act upon their preferences.

Another significant dimension is property ownership, investment, and major financial decisions. Control over property and productive assets has historically been an important source of economic security and bargaining power within families. Women's ownership or inheritance of property can potentially strengthen their position in household negotiations and increase their economic autonomy. However, formal ownership does not always translate into effective control. Social expectations surrounding inheritance, family property, dowry, and women's dependence on male relatives can influence the extent to which women exercise actual authority over assets. Similarly, decisions concerning land, housing, business investment, bank deposits, insurance, loans, and other major financial matters may continue to be dominated by men, particularly where men are perceived as the principal economic providers. Kabeer (1999) argues that access to resources is closely connected with the capacity to exercise agency. Therefore, examining women's participation in property and investment decisions is essential for understanding whether changes in gender roles are accompanied by a substantive redistribution of economic power.

The relationship between women's economic contribution and decision-making power is consequently a central issue in the study of changing gender roles. Economic resources can provide women with greater bargaining capacity and reduce their dependence on other family members. Women's employment may also increase their confidence, social networks, access to information, and ability to negotiate family choices. However, economic contribution alone cannot eliminate deeply embedded gender norms. In many families, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic labour even when they contribute significantly to household income. Hochschild and Machung (2012) describe this continuing imbalance as the “second shift,” whereby employed women undertake substantial domestic work after completing their paid employment. This indicates that women's economic participation may coexist with persistent inequalities in household responsibilities and authority. Therefore, the relationship between income and decision-making should be understood as complex and mediated by education, family structure, social norms, employment conditions, and individual attitudes.

The nature of decision-making also varies according to family structure and socio-economic circumstances. In nuclear families, spouses may have greater autonomy in making decisions because of reduced involvement from extended family members, while joint or extended families may involve multiple generations in important decisions. Similarly, higher household income may provide greater flexibility in financial choices, whereas economically vulnerable families may experience greater dependence on the income of the primary earner. Education can facilitate communication and joint decision-making, but traditional gender norms may persist even among highly educated families. Rural and urban families may also demonstrate different patterns depending upon occupational structures, cultural expectations, access to resources, and women's participation in economic activities. These variations indicate that gendered decision-making cannot be explained through a single factor; rather, it emerges from the interaction of economic, educational, cultural, generational, and institutional conditions.

1.4 Factors Influencing Gender Equality and Family Decision-Making

Gender equality and decision-making within contemporary Indian families are influenced by a combination of educational, economic, demographic, cultural, and technological factors. Education and awareness play an important role by increasing knowledge about rights, opportunities, and gender equality, thereby encouraging women to participate more actively in family decisions (Kabeer, 1999). Employment and income can strengthen women's bargaining position and financial autonomy, although earning an income does not necessarily ensure equal authority within the household. Economic dependency may continue to restrict women's freedom to make independent decisions, particularly regarding major financial and personal matters.

Age, generation, and marital status also influence family decision-making. Younger and educated couples may demonstrate greater acceptance of shared responsibilities than older generations, although traditional expectations may continue across generations. Similarly, caste, class, and socio-cultural background shape gender norms and access to resources. Rural and urban

families may differ because of variations in education, employment opportunities, social exposure, and family structures, although patriarchal practices can exist in both settings.

The growing influence of media and digital technology has exposed individuals to alternative ideas concerning relationships, gender equality, women's employment, and shared parenting. Nevertheless, traditional patriarchal expectations continue to influence women's mobility, domestic responsibilities, marriage choices, and authority. Finally, the unequal distribution of work and family responsibilities remains a major challenge. Women who participate in paid employment frequently continue to undertake a disproportionate share of household and caregiving work, creating the “double burden” described by Hochschild and Machung (2012). Thus, gender equality depends not only on women's economic participation but also on a broader redistribution of authority, domestic labour, resources, and family responsibilities.

1.5 Findings

The study indicates that gender roles within contemporary Indian families are gradually changing, although the transformation remains uneven. Women's increasing educational attainment, employment, and economic contribution have strengthened their participation in household affairs and decision-making. At the same time, men are increasingly participating in childcare, household management, and other domestic responsibilities. These changes suggest a gradual movement away from rigid gender-based roles towards more flexible and negotiated family relationships. However, traditional expectations continue to influence many households, particularly regarding women's domestic responsibilities and caregiving roles.

The extent of women's participation in family decision-making has also increased, particularly in matters related to children's education, household expenditure, healthcare, and family welfare. In many families, decisions are increasingly discussed jointly by husbands and wives rather than being determined exclusively by male members. Women's employment and financial contribution appear to strengthen their bargaining position and confidence in expressing preferences. Nevertheless, participation does not always imply equal authority. Women may be consulted on everyday matters while major decisions concerning property, investments, marriage, and significant financial issues continue to be influenced predominantly by men.

An important emerging trend is the development of shared decision-making between spouses. Contemporary families increasingly demonstrate consultation, cooperation, and negotiation in areas such as financial planning, children's education, career choices, healthcare, and household responsibilities. Such patterns indicate a gradual movement towards partnership-based family relationships. However, this transition varies according to education, income, employment, family structure, generation, and socio-cultural background. The transformation is therefore better understood as a gradual process rather than a complete replacement of traditional family practices. Despite these positive developments, gender inequalities and patriarchal practices remain significant challenges. Women continue to bear a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and caregiving work, even when they are employed outside the home. Traditional

expectations concerning motherhood, household management, obedience, and adjustment may restrict women's autonomy. Similarly, men's greater control over property, major financial decisions, and family resources can continue to create unequal power relations. As Hochschild and Machung (2012) demonstrate, women's participation in paid employment does not necessarily eliminate the unequal distribution of domestic labour.

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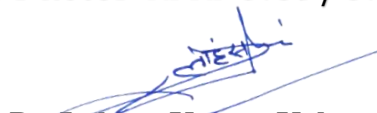
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