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WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE DOMESTIC DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN BANGLADESH: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Given the prevalence of a patriarchal society in Bangladesh, it is customary for women to be subjected to dominance by their male companions. Gender incongruity in domestic decision-making is a common occurrence in Bangladesh. Men assume the leading position, whereas women are subordinate to their male counterparts. Women residing in rural areas should possess a clear understanding of their role within the household and strive to be self-reliant in order to actively engage in the decision-making process. The study's objective was to determine the involvement of women in the process of making decisions inside the home. This study is conducted using primary data gathered from Horikumaria, situated in the Madaripur district. The study employed a blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches to scrutinize the collected data and examine the findings. The study's findings unequivocally demonstrate that men possess a far higher degree of decision-making authority, amounting to almost 90%, in domains such as household infrastructure, financial matters, children's education, and other familial concerns. However, women have the power to make decisions in certain areas, such as cattle management and organizing specific events for women. Various factors, including education, occupation, religion, age, physical appearance, and family-related norms and values, have a direct or indirect impact on women's participation in household decision-making.

KEYWORDS: *women, decision-making process, domestic, role, issue, occupation, involvement.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The entire population of Bangladesh is 171 million, with 83.91 million men and 87.09 million women, according to BBS's Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (SVRS) 2023 report. Despite the substantial presence of women in Bangladesh, their autonomy is not always equal to that of males. The country has 81.1% male-headed households and 18.9% female-headed households, according to BBS. Bangladesh has a patriarchal social system. Women's ability to participate to all aspects of society is not always feasible. Women are falling behind in all aspects of society. Consequently, they have a greater level of engagement in domestic tasks compared to their involvement in social and economic endeavors. Women make substantial contributions to both domestic chores and the overall household income. However, women also have inequitable opportunities when it comes to household chores. The disparity in women's access to resources and opportunities contributes to their vulnerability inside the family setting. The head of the family always takes responsibility for maintaining domestic activities and is also the main decision-maker in the family. Typically, people regard the leading earner or the oldest family member as the head of the family. In a rural environment, the household acts as a vital unit for consumption and labor supply decisions. Compared to men, women are more involved in household management and activities related to family well-being. However, gender-based power imbalances within households and communities, as well as biased social norms across societies, influence women's involvement in domestic matters.

Domestic decision-making plays a crucial role in managing a family. In Bangladesh, gender inequality in household decision-making processes is prevalent, similar to other developing nations. Patriarchal norms also influence decision-making, which typically involves selecting a course of action from a range of options. It also varies by class, religion, culture, and geographic location, specifically in rural areas. Decisions in rural families are typically influenced by the overall welfare and financial condition of the family. The characteristics of the family, including age, gender, health status, farming experience, knowledge and skills of the family members, and relationships among them, also influence decisions. Various factors influence the decision-making authority of women in different activities. Therefore, this study wants to examine the involvement of women in domestic decision-making processes at Horikumaria under Madaripur district.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A literature review refers to an overview of previously published works on a specific topic. It's a summary, an evaluation, and a critique of the recent state of knowledge concerning a particular area of research. Researchers and scholars have worked on and studied the topic of women's

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involvement in domestic decision-making processes for decades.

Nadin Shaanta Murshid draws from bargaining theory and states that the overall decision-making in households is conflictual, but this conflict can be vanquished through bargaining. Access to micro financial aid and microloans influences women's participation in household decision-making. If they have economic power, women can make decisions about large or small purchases. Control over the household's resources is critical in bargaining, increasing the likelihood of having household decision-making power (Murshid et al., 2018). In their research article, Zohra S. Lassi, Anna Ali, and Salima Meher Ali concluded that a variety of socio-economic factors, including exposure to mass media, influence the empowerment of women in Pakistan. Patriarchal structures in society, discriminatory gender roles, and violence result in the vulnerability of women in the household, as well as in Pakistani society (Lassi et al., 2019). Biswas argues that the disparity in home and political decision-making between men and women demonstrates women's marginalization and absence of authority, thereby hindering the country's progress and its capacity to achieve maximum growth (Biswas, 2004). The active participation of women in the decision-making process is an essential prerequisite for addressing global poverty and safeguarding human rights (DFID, 2021). Rural women face significant constraints in accessing employment opportunities, regardless of their skill level, literacy, age, or socioeconomic status. They have substantial obstacles in overseeing their household and participating in self-employment. Regardless of whether it is agricultural or non-agricultural employment, individuals experience deprivation in all circumstances (Ara et al., 2005). Ghimire in his thesis argues that women don't possess the land and they lack other resources and sources of income, they are mainly dependent on their husbands to fulfill their needs. But when it comes to utilizing and get access to land resources, the women have the accessibility without having control of the benefits of resources (Ghimire et al., 2009). Fernandez (2016) found that according to recent studies, there is still a division of household chores by gender, depending on the particular gender role. According to Dr. Lorraine Corner, "Women are far from achieving equal participation in decision-making and leadership. For most of the cases, the scenario is rather gloomy. Women's share of decision-making and leadership is quite small and in most parts of the world, there show no clear and vivid trend toward progress." The literature acknowledges some gaps. Being economically independent, women cannot always participate in the family decision-making process. Decisions about their children's futures do not always give them priority. Because patriarchal social structures have privileges in Bangladesh, women are far behind in achieving their goals in rural areas of the country.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework functions as a fundamental review of existing theories, offering a guide for the development of the arguments that will be employed in this work. This section compiles pertinent and reliable theories that are pertinent to the investigation, enabling readers to capitalize on them through conceptualizations, explanations, and assumptions.

3.1 Conflict Theory of Gender

Conflict theorists contend that the best way to understand gender is when men try to maintain power and privilege at the expense of women. For this reason, we can view men as the dominant group and women as the inferior group. While conflict theorists concede that some gender roles may have been appropriate for hunting and gathering societies, they contend that the only reason these roles continue is because the dominant group naturally tries to hold on to its dominance and status. Dominant groups abuse and repress subordinate groups. Men have historically controlled the majority of societies. According to German sociologist Fredrick Engels, the nuclear family is the main cause of women's subjugation. It was a simple act of hypocrisy that led to the degradation of women or wives at the hands of their husbands, as well as the ultimate power inequality it produces. Marx, along with his close friend and compatriot Engels, asserted that the ruling class systematically oppresses women and views them as second-class citizens, aiming to elevate women's status in both the domestic sphere and the larger social milieu (Communist Manifesto). Marx believed that all inequality stemmed from the division of labor along sexual lines. According to Marx's succinct observation, the origin of inequality is the sexual division of labor, which results from the biological distinction between men and women. Marx's theory of capitalism clearly views the working class as nothing more than "instruments of production" that the "bourgeoisie" can employ for their own purposes. Many civilizations have failed to address the real "glass ceiling" issue, resulting in the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in both industry and politics. Even women must deal with the glass ceiling that stands in the way of their professional advancement, care for the development of their children without much, if any, remuneration, and also shoulder the majority of the duties for unpaid household chores (Karl Marx, Hilary Rose, Heather Brown, Chistine Di Stefano).

3.2 Theory of Patriarchy

Smith defines patriarchy as consisting of two elements: an ideology that reinforces the belief that men hold more power and privilege than women. Lerner (1987) asserts that men and women historically created patriarchy over a period of over 5000 years. Additionally, he claimed that patriarchy had its origins in an ancient empire whose primary unit of government was the patriarchal family. These patriarchal families reflected society's norms and values, as well as continuously creating them. In this context, the relationship between the sexes is a "relationship of dominance and subordinance," alluding to "power-structured relationships" in politics. The patriarchal system gives rise to two significant ideas: male superiority and female inferiority. Since ancient times, men have consistently subjugated women through their relationships and ideologies. Additionally, men frequently associate patriarchal norms with wife abuse and beating, a tactic they use to exert control over women. According to Alvarez and Bachman (2008), patriarchal attitudes function by empowering individuals to exercise authority within their families, perpetuating the power imbalance between men and women, and perpetuating social

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structures that afford men additional privileges. Men often beat and humiliate their spouses in patriarchal countries, and this kind of behavior is both commonplace and fundamental to patriarchal ideas. These ideas give rise to a clear status and role for women in the family and in society. Every woman in the majority of traditional South Asian societies settles into extended families after marriage, where she is subordinate to all of the men and other elderly members of the family (Kandiyoti, 1998). Partner abuse may occur if they are indifferent to such behavioral rules. It is challenging for women to openly dispute these gender and status hierarchies because of the socialization of both men and women regarding gender roles, as well as cultural standards regarding the woman's role in marriage and obligations to her husband.

3.3 Gender Inequality Theory

The theoretical viewpoints on gender inequality Sociologists see gender inequality in many different ways. Some sociologists view gender inequality as consisting of many groups in conflict, competing for scarce resources. According to Schaefer (2007), gender inequality is defined as the denial of opportunities and equivalent rights to individuals and groups based on gender that result from a society's normal actions. Gender inequality denotes the difference in status, power, and prestige that are maintained by women and men in various contexts in society (Giddens, 2001). Anthropologist George Murdock (1949) argued that it is both practical and convenient that women should focus on domestic and family-related responsibilities while men work outside the home. The sexual division of labour exists in all cultures. All cultures assign men the role of hunting. They frequently stay away from home for long periods of time and focus their lives on collecting food for the family. Pregnancy, childbirth, and child pampering often limit women's activity, assigning them to domestic roles near the home such as gathering, subsistence farming, and caring for children and households. Women take the expressive, emotionally supportive roles, and men take the instrumental and more practical roles (Parsons and Bales, 1956). Women do not have the equal access to resources as men. They are deprived because of their specific gender identity and physical vulnerability. From her own home to her in-law's house, a baby girl faces gender inequality. Even women struggle to play a crucial role in household decision-making due to the dominance of male family members. In Horikumaria, women's access to all sectors is not equal to that of men. Within the family, the grandparents also give preference to their male grandson. The patriarchal social system prevails in this village, which has made women passive to the males. Their contributions to the family are often overlooked. They are exploited in various ways. Gender inequality is much noticed in village families.

4. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study is to investigate about the participation of women in domestic decision-making processes in Horikumaria, located in the Madaripur district. Therefore, the unit of analysis consists of married women who manage households and reside in that specific area. The purposive sampling strategy was employed in this study to gather data. It's a kind of non-probability sampling, as not all population members have an equal chance to participate in the study. Since the study is for women in a particular area, the study population is definite, and the researcher relied on his own judgment when choosing the population of the study to participate in the interview. For this reason, it is purposive. The entire sample size for this study consisted of fifty married women. For collecting the necessary information, a structured questionnaire and checklists with a series of closed-ended and open-ended questions were used. A face-to-face interview was conducted with the respondents. The entire sample size for this study consisted of fifty married women. The data is analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, based on the study questions and objectives. The gathered data has undergone editing, refining, and classification in accordance with the research objectives. A few respondents are allowed to record their responses, and others need to note them down on paper. The next step involves carefully reading the note multiple times to grasp the key points. Then the answer was categorized by section according to the objectives, which are known as coding. The findings have been described with narrative discussion.

5. FINDINGS

The data analysis is the subject of this chapter, which is followed by a discussion of the research findings. The findings of the research provide a platform to present the information that was collected from participants. This section includes a discussion of existing literature, theory, and how current research contributes to the field. Fifty respondents residing in Horikumaria, Madaripur, participated in this study. The overall scenario has been drawn from the study.

5.1 Engaging in the Decision-Making Process for Family-Related Issues

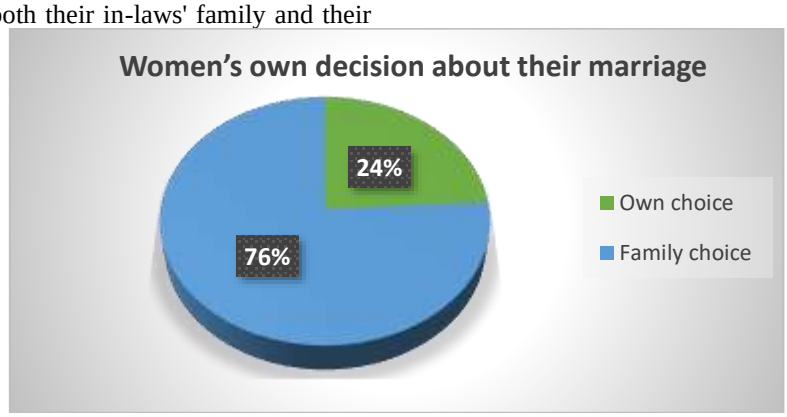
The participants exhibited reluctance in divulging information regarding their perspectives. Most of the participants stated a need for reassurance regarding the secrecy of the study. Despite this, the respondents provided extremely clear information. Out of the entire sample, more than 70% respondents reported having an arranged marriage.

5.1.1 Women's own decisions about their marriage

The majority of individuals in Horikumaria households either limited literacy skills or lack a high level of education. Consequently, the citizens of this area demonstrate a dearth of interest in education. The parents of the females are consistently enthusiastic about promptly sending their daughters to the groomsman. They don't want to delay their daughters' marriages. The majority of the males in this community reside overseas. The level of schooling in this region is subpar. The impoverished, uneducated parents experience feelings of insecurity regarding their daughters. They think that it's unnecessary to educate the daughters any longer. As their daughters grow older, arranging their marriages becomes more challenging. Before marriage, the girls don't have so much time to know about their groom. They never have the opportunity to meet their future husband. However, the groom's family members often judge the bride harshly. They compel a girl to marry without her consent, treating her as if she lacks the autonomy to make her own decisions. In 76% of cases, the groom chooses the bride. They have to rely on their family

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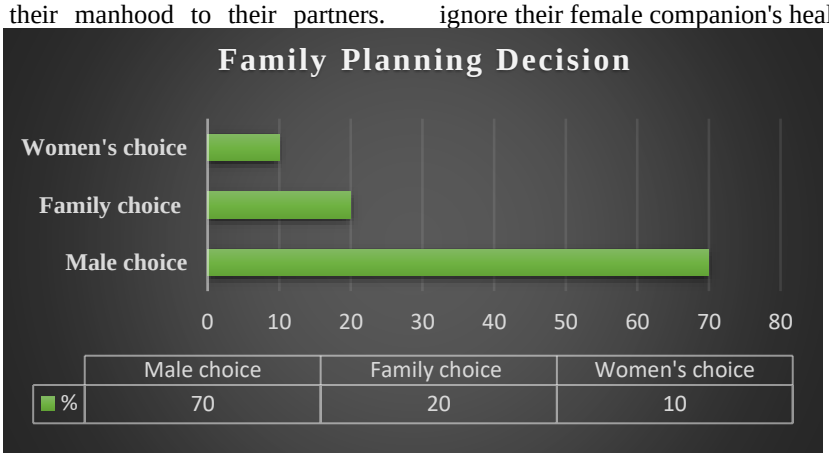
decisions. After being married, if women perceive a disparity between their mindset and way of life compared to their husbands, they often choose to maintain silence in order to preserve the reputation of both their in-laws' family and their own family. Women in that village adhere to the ancient custom of accepting their husbands as they are. Following marriage, a husband assumes a key role in a wife's life.



Source: Field Survey, 2023

5.1.2 Women's Decisions in the Family Planning Process

Contraceptives are used in birth control today. However, Horikumaria women cannot make contraceptive decisions. Husbands always see their wives as easily influenced. They also feel compelled to show their manhood to their partners. Husbands always recommend contraceptive pills over condoms for birth control. Regular pharmaceutical use has altered their bodies. Because many men work abroad, husbands and their families want children quickly after marriage. They often ignore their female companion's health.



Source: Field Survey, 2023

5.1.3 Women's decision to maintain the relationship with their relatives

After marriage, a woman is considered to be a good housewife if she can maintain a relationship with her relatives. In this situation, she must handle all matters using her knowledge. One of the respondents, Monira Akter, who is 28 years old, stated, "I am happy with my husband." He really cares for me. But my husband and my mother-in-law forbade me to continue any kind of relationship with my own family. After marriage, I used to pay two visits to my father's house. However, they are now insistent that I cease this practice. And I have to abide by their decision. There is no other option but to comply with the husband's decision. In the home of their in-laws, women are obligated to follow the rules set by their husbands and their in-law's family. A woman can't even decide for herself how to act or react with her relatives. Restrictions bind her everywhere she goes.

5.2 Participation in Decision-Making Regarding Children's Education

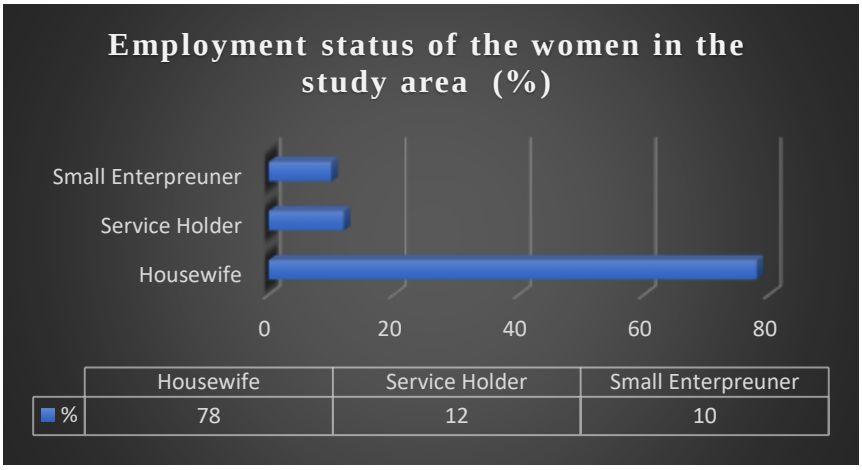
Husband and wife raise their kids. Socializing their children from birth is their responsibility. Rabeya Akter (35) stated, "My father- and mother-in-law have been sick for almost two years. We must stay in the village. Most of my neighbors' children attended top Madaripur City schools and institutions. I attempted to persuade my husband, but he said who would take care of the house and his parents if we moved to the city? As a woman, I can't educate my kids alone. My choice is irrelevant." Despite their lack of knowledge, Horikumaria women fight to convince their families of the need of their children's education and create a good learning environment. Every woman wants her children to be well-educated, yet she faces difficulties and can't always select their destiny.

5.3 Participation in the Decision-Making Process Regarding Financial Issues

There is no family that can make it without money. The decision of where and how to spend the money is made jointly by the husband and the wife. The differences between my

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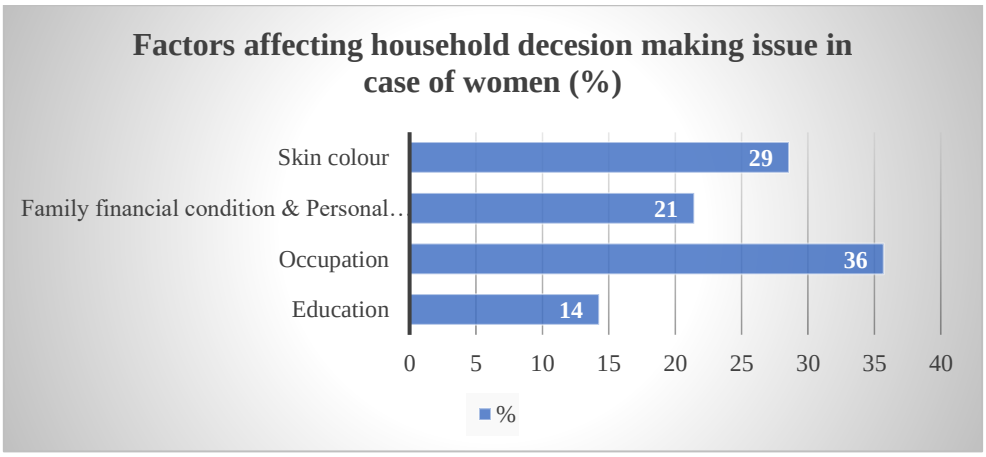
respondents, however, include. They do not always find a solution to the household's financial problems through their common decisions. The occurrence of this phenomena is restricted to situations in which women do not earn the majority of the household's income. In addition, the study looked at situations in which women were performing the role of service holders.



Source: Field Survey, 2023

5.3.1 Women's socio-economic background affects their financial decision-making in households

The socio-economic background of women significantly influences their decision-making process within the household. If a woman holds a lower social status, her family will treat her accordingly. Most of them came from very poor families. During my wedding, the groom family couldn't fulfill the demands of the bride family, but they didn't ask clearly about their demands. For that reason, women's have to face this issue, and bride family members somehow tease women because of this. Most women are not financially independent, which is why their husbands and other family members tend to avoid involvement in household financial matters.

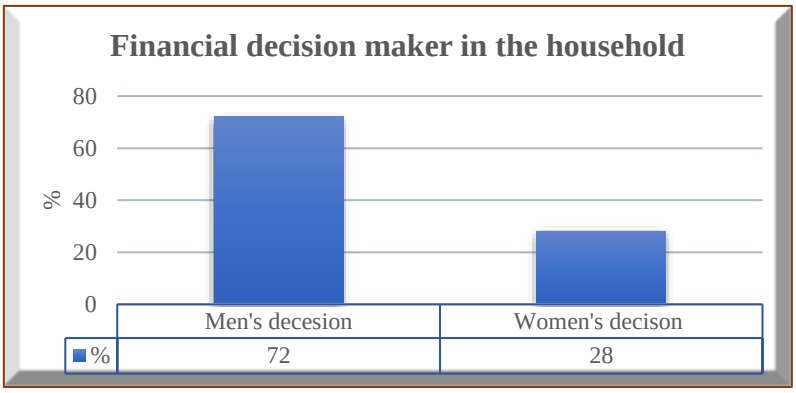


Source: Field Survey, 2023

5.3.2 Financial dependency affects women's domestic decision-making power

A woman's financial dependence on her father-in-law's family makes her vulnerable to household decisions after marriage. Without economic power, a woman can't make family decisions. The women in Horikumaria are economically dependent on their husbands. I used to sew people's clothes and earn money. One of the respondents said, "But I couldn't spend it on myself. My husband insisted I live off his salary. I quit sewing and relied on my husband's income after a few days. I apologize to him whenever I waste his money. He questions my authority to disperse money."

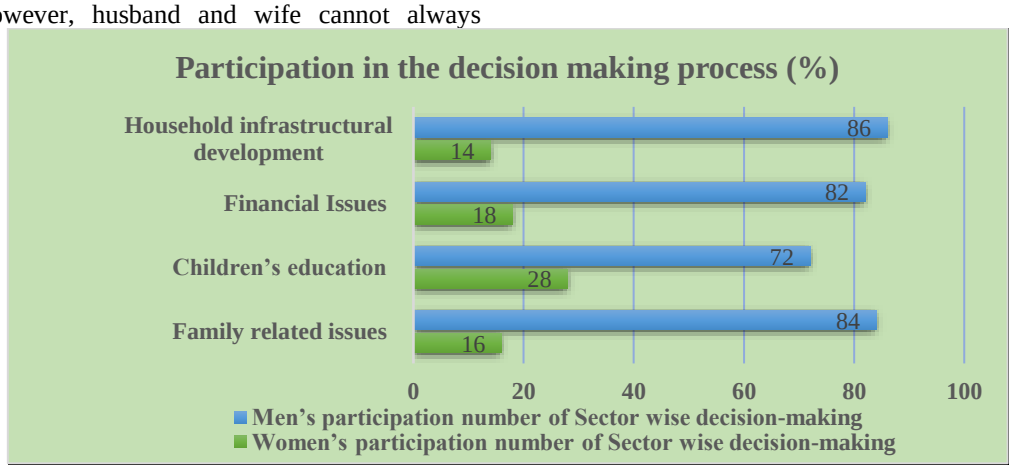
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Source: Field Survey, 2023

5.4 Participating in the Decision-Making Process for Household Infrastructural Development and Other Issues

Infrastructural development is a core matter in household management. However, husband and wife cannot always participate and make decisions on this issue equally. Husbands typically assume a dominant role in this regard.



Source: Field Survey, 2023

6. DISCUSSION

Overall, women's participation in household decision-making processes is poor. The women in Horikumaria are considered to be inferior to men. They have few opportunities to participate in household-related matters. The discussion section generally arranges the description of any research results in a logical sequence. This section's arrangement is consistent with the theory and review of the existing literature. The following is a discussion of the research results, which are based on the research objectives.

6.1 Role of Women in the Domestic Decision-Making Process

Women have to play many roles in the household. However, certain constraints limit her ability to make decisions. In Bangladesh, women are still lagging behind their male partners. It is worth mentioning that in a remote village area such as Horikumaria, women's roles in household decision-making are very limited. Even their continuous contributions to the family are considered minimal. Family members rarely seek the women's input in major decision-making processes. Horikumaria's women rarely engage in professional work outside the village. They work all day long for the family. Occasionally, people ask women for their opinions, yet fail to consider them. A woman, as a homemaker, gives importance to other people's decisions, but no one considers hers important. In some cases, women attempt to participate in family decision-making despite the negligence of their family members. As a housewife and mother, a woman is constantly concerned about her family members. Whenever she is unable to influence the main decisions of the family, she tries to do something secretly. One cannot overstate the importance of a woman's role in her family. But her role is always underestimated.

6.2 The Contributing Factors Influencing Women's Participation

The women of Horikumaria village lack a high level of education. Twelve of the 50 women interviewed had not even completed their primary education, and fifteen had not completed their secondary education. They are not conscious enough of their roles and rights in family decision-making. There are many more factors that affect the decision-making process. The decision-making process is influenced by various factors, including the educational background of women, family traditions, their tender nature, socio-economic status, religion, and the husband-wife relationship. The village women are not workaholics. They stay in the house all day and spend their time cooking, washing family members' clothes, cleaning the house, etc. Only 14 out of the 50 respondents in the research sample, either through service or as small entrepreneurs, generate income. But a few of their husbands don't allow it to be done at all. The village people are so traditional. They expect the housewives to be docile and kind

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by nature. They should respect the decisions made by their father-in-law's family members. The women also feel nervous, especially the newly married women, about altering the decision-making process in the household. The social construction of beliefs and norms always tries to suppress women. Husbands' opinions shape family perceptions of women's recognition. Family members see how a spouse treats his wife. If he performs appropriately and values his wife's decision, his parents and other family members will too. If her husband doesn't appreciate her decision, the family may not either. This is why the husband-wife relationship is essential for home decision-making. Some spouses find hearing their wives' decisions humiliating. The patriarchal society restricts women's speech. No need to make them family leaders. However, one of my participants insisted on working, despite her husband's warnings to send her back to her father's house or face divorce.

6.3 The Value of Women as Family Members

The value of women as family members in the family affects their involvement in the domestic decision-making process. They are valued less than the family's earning members. Like all other active members of the family, they struggle to fulfill their needs and demands. The family simply views the women as caregivers. Her duty is solely to serve the family members, to understand their feelings and their suffering. Among the 50 respondents, it's evident that they find it difficult to discuss their issues with those closest to them. Even when they are sick, they get a little help from family members. To purchase a dress for herself, she must consult her husband for assistance. She is only responsible for managing domestic tasks, not domestic decisions. Whenever a wife visits her father's house, it becomes almost impossible for her husband to manage his daily necessities and cook food for daily consumption. It appears that her worth lies solely in her ability to prepare meals and maintain the house. Only the male partner's decisions in the house can pave the way for the family's progression. The family members of my research participants are ignorant about the quality of their female family members to decide about the household management system.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Generally, women in Bangladesh face many types of barriers to participating in the domestic decision-making process. These issues are particularly significant in rural areas. The rural areas are much more patriarchal than the urban areas. When a girl grows up in her father's house, she always abides by her parents' decisions. Her parents decide who will be her groom, and after marriage, she follows her husband's decision, sometimes forcefully or willingly. The structure of our society prevents a woman from exercising her own decision-making power. Socio-economic and other traditional factors influence the domestic decision-making process of women in Horikumaria, as observed among 50 respondents. Their family members do not always seek their opinion when making major decisions. Men's decisions are final in 70% of cases. They don't care about women's decisions. In Horikumaria, a woman who is dependent on her husband is also vulnerable to the decision-making process. Her husband and other family members also make decisions about the number of children they will have and their education. The women can't work outside without their husband's consent. Domestic decision-making mainly depends on the earning members and the eldest members of the household. The women can only give their opinion on some small matters. Most of her decisions are denied. The women must adapt their thinking to align with the decisions made by their families. The women in this village are also deprived of their skin color. Approximately 30% of husbands prioritize their attractive wives. Their appearance provokes their husbands and other family members to fall for them. On the other hand, those who are black or not attractive are lagging behind on all sides.

Recommendations

To improve the status of women's participation in domestic decision-making processes, some significant steps can be taken. These recommendations can be given below:

- Enhancing the education of women is necessary to ensure that their family members acknowledge their competence and include them in the decision-making process.
  Women with limited access to higher education have the opportunity to engage in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), tailoring, crafts, and online small businesses. These activities can provide them with income and improve their influence in the decision-making process.
- Women should increase their awareness of their rights and obligations. They should refrain from perceiving themselves as subordinate to their masculine counterpart. They should not rely on their male companion for every element of their lives.
  Women have the ability to effectively communicate the significance of their family members' participation in decision-making processes.

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