

Part III

Domestic and Public Spaces



Unequal They Stand: Decision-making and Gendered Spaces within Family

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Introduction

The ongoing discussion on inclusive social policy repeatedly brings equity issues for women to the fore and India is no exception. Very often naively conceptualised notions about women's access to education and income generation are seen as translating into overall empowerment for them, including their status in the family. This is done without much attention to evidence in literature pointing otherwise (Cornwell and Chou 1986; Hull 1979; Sharma 1980) at the expense of women's contested location in the family vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Research shows how gender relations are undergoing transformation in favour of women in public spheres and still maintain zealous resistance to any change in private domains (Raju 2005c).

The family has remained insulated from public policy for long on the assumption that it is a homogeneous unit where all members enjoy the same social privilege, experience the same standard of living and share the same life chances and are, therefore, social equals.¹ However, studies suggest that men and women within

¹ The concept of family carries different meanings and implies different connotations depending upon the perspective one looks through. There has been an intense debate in sociological and anthropological literature as to what the standard definition of family should be. It is suggested that there are various ways of looking at the term and concept of family. For one thing, marriage does not necessarily mean constitution of family, nor divorce mean dissolution of family, nor is household synonymous with family (see Levin and Trost 1992). However, given the lack of any standard definition of the concept of family, for the present purpose family is taken as a social group consisting of at least one spousal unit.

families neither have equal access to resources — both material and non-material — within the families, nor do they experience equal life chances (Bardhan 1974; Behrman 1988; Sen 1984), leading to different life outcomes. The family itself can thus be the site of various forms of gender inequalities at various stages of women's lifecycles. One such form stemming from within the family is inequality in the decision-making process. Arguably, the degree to which women have control over their lives, decide things for themselves and/or are able to negotiate with their male partners or simply participate in decision-making on usual family matters, if not all, is reflective of their empowerment as it reflects their choices, behaviour and various positive outcomes (Dyson and Moore 1983; Morgan et al. 2002). Thus, if women's decision-making power is seen as a direct measure of gender equity as well as empowerment, the key questions that need to be addressed are:

- (a) How do women stand vis-à-vis men in day-to-day decision-making processes in the family? Do they participate on an equal footing with men or are just subservient to them?
- (b) How does the decision-making power of women vary with socio-cultural context? What are the enabling factors and whether education and employment status positively and significantly contribute to their decision-making power in the family?
- (c) Do education and employment have a linear and unidirectional impact on women's decision-making power independent of spatial context or do spatial specifics intersect the educational and employment attributes to result in spatially contextualised geographies of women's decision-making power?

At this point, it may be observed that women's decision-making power and the underlying factors influencing it is of immense significance and yet the available studies, mainly carried out by demographers, are limited in their scope. Their focus remains confined to the hypothesised association between the decision-making power of women and their reproductive outcomes — an instrumentalist approach rather than situating the decision-making process in the broader socio-spatial domain. Given this, this chapter attempts to address concerns just outlined with the help of the latest round of

National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2005–2006.² As the purpose is to uncover women's ability to share the decision-making spaces with their husbands, this study confines itself to currently married women. The chapter is divided into five sections. The following section is an overview of theories/approaches; especially feminists' approaches trying to explain women's exclusion in supposedly shared spaces by men and women. The second section attempts to profile the socio-economic status of married women followed by the third section which documents the patterns of their decision-making. The fourth section discusses certain correlates of women's decision-making power within the family. The fifth section presents an upshot of the discussion.

Decision-making Power of Women within the Family: Theoretical Perspectives

Gendered inequalities in both public and domestic spheres across societies and cultures, albeit in varying degrees and forms, have led to diverse interpretations, theoretical formulations and approaches. Of these, the feminist perspectives are the most salient ones, although these also have diverse strands. Overall, the feminist perspectives on gender inequality can be subsumed into two broad approaches: *gender role* and *gender relations*.

The *gender role thesis* attributes gender inequality to the sexual division of labour primarily into production and reproduction and the association of these divisions with separate spheres of influence — public with production and reproduction with private. By virtue of biologically-endorsed reproductive responsibilities, home and hearth of the private spheres came to be associated with women whereas the outdoor public spheres were traditionally the legitimate place for men (Dunn et al. 1993; Rogers 1980). As the reproductive responsibilities and associated tasks became confined

² NFHS (2005–2006) is one of the large-scale representative sample surveys, maintaining a rigorous social scientific sampling design, high quality data and editing procedures in the country. It covers all the states of the country by collecting information on a wide range of demographic, social and economic indicators of about 109,041 households.

to home, they were carried out as unpaid work, and as the public was linked with market and paid activities, the gender segregated occupational/domestic roles made women undervalued because they also had less control over material and non-material resources. Blumberg (1984) argues that the degree to which women control the means of production determines their general power and status.

The *gender relation thesis* locates the origin of women's subordination in the social organisation of power relations based on sexual differences — power which is deeply entrenched in patriarchy as an ideological system that holds men superior to women — men as bread-winners and women as mothers and caretakers of children and other domestic chores. This ideology is defended, maintained and reconfigured through a complex web of institutions, norms, values and laws (Chafetz 1990; Huber 1990). In other words, allocation of status, power and resources in society are made according to the positioning of gender categories in the social order (Ferree and Hall 2000). Thus, gender carries a meaning of hierarchy that naturalises and legitimates subordination and inequality. It is organised at all levels — micro (interpersonal), meso (inter-group) and macro (institutional).

These two approaches primarily focusing on structures that produce and reproduce gender inequality offer deeper insights into gender inequality in society. However, they are faced with several limitations. The common weakness of these two approaches is that both treat gender as a monolithic social category. Gender is seen as internally homogeneous. Recent research has shown that gender disadvantages are multi-dimensional (Jeejeebhoy and Sathar 2001; Jeffery et al. 1988; Malhotra et al. 1995; Raju 1993c). Gender boundaries are, therefore, fluid and permeable. Seen in this light, gender inequalities in any area ought to be studied by intertwining several dimensions of social stratification such as race or ethnicity, class, space and so on rather than separate (Collins 1990) as the notion and practice of gender roles and gender relations are not invariable across social space.

Yet, another limitation of gender role and gender relation theses is that both present structurally-determinant arguments by conceptualising inequality as a constant, incapable of getting eroded, reduced or eliminated (Anderson 1996). Hence, the questions of agency and change are often glossed over in these approaches. Scholars like Giddens (1984), Alexander (1988) and others have

demonstrated how individuals create social structures that constrain and enable them. In sum, the structures are not fixed nor do social values remain unchanged; they are alterable. Human agency has the potential of social creation, maintenance and alteration of structures.

Given the inadequacy of available models based on structures, which are uncritically accepted as pervasive or on women's individual attributes, this study contests the conventional studies and looks beyond familiar attributes of women's decision-making power. It argues that neither structures nor individual attributes provide sufficient bases for unveiling the decision-making process amongst women across the Indian space. Instead, these characteristics are altered or modified according to regions with their socio-cultural and historical region-specific attributes, that is, spatial embeddedness, a component part of the analytical framework, which remains under researched by geographers.³

The following section locates women in domains conventionally understood as empowering individuals. It then takes into account several layers of women's inclusion in decision-making processes. Finally, it examines how interaction of a complex web of factors in consonance within spatial context makes a difference in their participation in decision-making processes.

Locating Married Women in Socio-economic Domains

As seen in the theoretical discussion, it has been argued that women's acquired individual attributes reflect their position in the social order and, in turn, these attributes, among other things, tend to have an important bearing on socially constructed and prescribed gender roles and gender relations affecting their lives. While this position is contested in this chapter, it would be not out place to discuss, albeit in brief, the socioeconomic standing of women in India.

³ While Dyson and Moore (1983), Jeejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) and Rahman and Rao (2004) have examined the role of regional specificities (in terms of the north-south divide) in influencing the life chances of women, they do not look beyond it to see the role of various social, economic and cultural processes within the region that create intra-region inequality of status among women.

Table 9.1 presents select socio-economic indicators pertaining to currently married women in India. Overall, slightly less than half of them are either illiterate or have received no formal education, less than one-third of them are educated till secondary level and only about 6 per cent to have got post-secondary education. This reflects the overall lower educational attainment of females in the country. However, there are considerable regional variations in terms of female literacy and educational attainment. Women in the southern and western regions are better placed in terms of educational attainment than the rest of India, though there remain considerable gender gaps in the former (Alam 2007). Conventionally, education for women is seen as a liberating force for it enables them to assert their rights and privileges in the family, provides them financial independence which in turn frees them from many patriarchal constraints and traditional values (Dreze and Sen 2004).

TABLE 9.1
Socio-economic Profile of Currently Married Women by Region

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>Central</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>All</i>
Education						
No Education	50.9	61.0	53.6	31.8	35.8	47.7
Primary	12.9	13.6	16.3	14.8	17.3	15.2
Secondary	28.4	20.6	26.5	45.4	39.5	31.1
Higher	7.8	4.8	3.6	8.0	7.4	6.0
Economic						
Worked in last 12 months	40.1	43.0	36.8	50.2	47.3	42.2
Nature of employment*						
All year	58.2	45.4	47.4	72.9	70.1	58.4
Seasonal	33.5	48.4	48.4	25.2	27.1	37.1
Occasional	8.3	6.2	4.2	1.9	2.8	4.5
Type of earning*						
Not paid	27.5	29.2	21.2	30.5	15.6	24.2
In kind only	20.9	21.2	15.1	3.0	1.6	11.8
Cash and kind	14.1	16.0	21.0	7.3	7.7	13.2
Cash only	37.5	33.6	42.7	59.2	75.1	50.8
Access to money*						
Have bank account	14.1	11.4	11.5	20.8	21.2	15.3
Have money for her own use	34.1	52.6	47.3	47.2	42.3	45.0

Source: NFHS (2005–2006), weighted data set.

Note: Total sample 89,780 (excluding the sample for the northeast region).

* Those who worked any time during the 12 months preceding the survey.

Of all the currently married women, less than half reported to be formally in the workforce, the productive process. Once again, there are remarkable regional variations in women's working status. While in the eastern region, one in every three women takes part in productive processes, by contrast, it is a much higher proportion in the western and southern regions. It can be recalled that women in these regions also have better educational chances, which enables them to enter the labour market in greater number.⁴

However, work participation rate as an economic indicator does not tell much. More important than this is the nature of employment as well as duration of work.⁵ It can be observed that for those who worked any time during the year (a large proportion did not work the whole year), their work was rather seasonal or occasional. Here again, the regional location of women seems to make a perceptible difference in the nature of employment. In the southern and western regions, about two-thirds of working women worked throughout the year whereas those in the eastern and central regions worked seasonally or occasionally. Spatial variations could also be seen in terms of type of earning. In the southern and western regions, most women earned cash whereas in the rest of India, a greater portion of working women were either not paid at all or paid in kind and cash.

⁴ However, education does not always behave as a positive correlate of women's likelihood of entering the labour market. In many situations, the education of women may not necessarily result in their access to the labour market. See Hull (1979) and Sharma (1985).

⁵ There are many who argue that although the labour market has not evolved to accommodate women, a vast majority of them work in the informal sectors as casual workers, wage labourers and in the formal sectors as unskilled/semiskilled or manual workers. NFHS (2005–2006) data supports this contention. As per NFHS, about 59 per cent of women (15–49) worked as agricultural labourers and about 22 per cent as production workers (including skilled, unskilled and manual occupations) as against 33 and 36 per cent, respectively, for men in the same age group. It is argued that economic development has strengthened rather than broken down the traditional sexual division of labour and values (Pai 1987; Singh 1996; Unni 1992). As a result, not only is there lower labour force participation of women, but also their concentration in low-paid traditional jobs. Even though women work, their work does not enable them to be economically independent.

One of the indicators of women's access to money is to have a bank or post office account in their names. One in every seven women has such an account. Even in the southern and western regions, where the majority of the women work throughout the year, only one-fifth of them have a bank or post office account (see Table 9.1). Thus, it can be said that women's work status does not seem to correlate with the possibility of having a bank or post office account.

In sum, women have poor educational attainment and a low work participation rate. Those who work do so seasonally or occasionally. Moreover, their work is undervalued as a large proportion of working women do not get paid for their work. If having a bank or post office account is considered as a measure of direct control over income, only a tiny proportion of women have this control. However, it must be noted that women's education or their chances of participation in productive processes are not uniform across the country. There are remarkable spatial variations in the life chances of women, though they might be still away from catching up with men.

Women's Decision-making Power within the Family: Socio-spatial Pattern

In day-to-day family life, there are many events that need thinking. Moreover, they undergo the processes of negotiations, consultations and even contestation between and among family members, in particular between couples. However, this study picks up only four decisions that are usually taken in the family: own health care, major household purchases, household purchases of daily needs and visiting natal family or relatives. As NFHS (2005–2006) data suggests, a little over one-third of currently married women participate in all four decisions and one-fifth of them do not take part in any, that is, they are totally excluded. The other women participate in any one or two decisions. Thus, even though women in general happen to be the caretakers of the household, the majority of them do not fully participate in the decision-making processes in the family.

However, the degree of participation of women in decision-making is bound to vary across Indian social space. Indeed, women in general make unequal partners with men, yet some women are more unequal than others. In this section, an attempt has made to capture some patterns of women's participation in decision-making processes.

Table 9.2 presents levels of women's participation in decision-making across the Indian social space.⁶

There are substantial differentials in women's participation in decision-making by the social categories they belong to. It is partly, as would appear, because each social group possesses distinctive values and belief systems, nurture different orientation of life and attitude towards women and more so remain at differing levels of socio-cultural advancement.

TABLE 9.2
Pattern of Women's Participation in Decision-making

<i>Background characteristics</i>	<i>Index of women's participation in decision-making</i>			
	<i>Very low</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
All	26.1	22.8	25.9	25.2
Religion				
Hindu	26.6	22.8	25.9	24.7
Muslim	28.6	22.7	24.5	24.2
Others	14.9	22.5	28.5	34.1
Castes/Tribes				
SC/ST	25.4	22.9	26.3	25.4
Non-SC/ST	26.4	22.6	25.6	25.4
Economic Class				
Poor	29.8	23.4	25.0	21.9
Middle	28.8	22.3	24.6	24.3
Rich	21.6	22.4	27.3	28.8
Regions				
North	29.2	23.3	22.3	25.1
Central	30.7	23.6	24.9	20.8
East	29.7	25.3	23.3	21.7
West	17.4	22.2	26.6	33.8
South	23.7	20.1	28.0	28.2

Source: NFHS (2005–2006).

Note: All figures in per cent.

⁶ Different scores were assigned to 'who takes the decision'? Scores were assigned as follows: 2 if she took decisions alone; 1 if she took decisions with her husband or with someone else in the family; 0 if husband or someone else alone took the decisions. These scores were summed up and classified into very low, low, medium and high categories. The scores ranged from 0 to 8.

Religion is arguably a clear axis of gender stratification for it provides a pattern of belief system. It prescribes values, norms, and attitudes, sets behaviour and orientation towards life of men and women. While all religions prescribe gender codes that effectively exclude women and subordinate them to men, it is debatable that women in Islamic settings occupy a distinctive and separate position that effectively denies them autonomy (Caldwell 1982; Sathar and Kazi 2001); Islam is more patriarchal than other religions (Balk 1994) and Muslim women in India as in other Islamic settings, are, therefore, likely to be socially more disadvantaged than women of other religions. One of the implications of being in a disadvantaged position is having less participation in decision-making. However, it appears that Muslim women do not do so badly as far as participation in decision-making is concerned (see Table 9.2). Both Hindu and Muslim women are equally placed in decision-making processes within the family. Some recent studies have also corroborated this finding (Jeejeebhoy and Sathar 2001).

Caste is another important axis of gender stratification in India. Different castes differ not only in terms of access to social and economic resources in society (Betancourt and Gleason 2000; Sengupta and Guha 2002), but also with regard to family systems and adherence to socio-cultural values. In general, the upper castes enjoy a relatively higher socio-economic status and are more exposed to education than others. If higher educational attainment is directly linked to women's participation in decision-making, as understood conventionally, women belonging to the upper castes should enjoy greater participation in decision-making. However, it appears that caste affiliation does not make any difference so far as participation of women in decision-making is concerned (see Table 9.2). It can be said that despite exposure to modern values, upper-caste families are also more conscious of old values and norms (*parampara* or *sanskriti*) that prescribe gender roles and expectations within family. Given this, upper-caste families would strictly follow prescribed gender codes. On the other hand, living in physical isolation, lower-caste families might not observe gender codes as strictly as upper-caste families do. Moreover, for lower-caste families, mostly poor, existential concerns precede any other social concerns operating at the macro level. Driven by quotidian needs, these families circumvent the taboos against women's work outside home. They let their women work and contribute to the family income. Even if lower-caste families are not

exposed to modern values or gender egalitarian systems, women's contribution to family income might enable them to have a greater say in the decisions taken in the family.

Class and gender systems have been well documented. It has long been argued by sociologists that different social classes espouse different socialisation values which vary in their evaluation of autonomy and conformity in female members of the family (Xiao and Andes 1999). Class factor is, therefore, expected to have an important bearing on their likelihood of participation in decision-making as well as their relative autonomy (Gilligan 1982).

In order to assess women's participation in decision-making by class, wealth index or economic index⁷ as constructed in NFHS (2005–2006), it is used here as a proxy for class. A gradual increase in women's participation in decision-making can be observed as one moves from being poor to rich. While women belonging to middle-class families do not significantly differ from those of the poor in the participation index, women in rich families seem to enjoy a relatively greater participation in decision-making, albeit vast proportion of them still demonstrate low participation.

It could be argued that women belonging to the upper classes are more likely to be educated and likely to be employed in formal sectors than the lower classes. As such, they are more likely to be assertive of their rights and their due place in the family and hence their greater participation in decision-making. However, what seems to be intriguing is the thin line between women of middle class and poor families. Theoretically, middle-class women and their spouses are educationally better off compared to poor women, which should have led them to greater participation in decision-making. However, as a 'custodian of morality' it is possible that typical middle-class families are more likely to be conscious of family values and their social status. They may allow girls to receive some levels of education,

⁷ The wealth index or economic index constructed in NFHS (2006–2007) includes both household assets and housing characteristics. The index is based on 33 household assets and housing characteristics. Different scores were given to each item and the scores were summed for each household. The whole sample was then divided into quintiles — poorest, poorer, middle, richer and richest (for details see National Family Health Survey 2005–2006). For convenience of analysis, poorest and poorer categories have been clubbed together. Similarly, richer and richest categories are clubbed together.

but may not allow them to work. This restricts women becoming economically independent, thus leading to their subordination affecting their participation in decision-making. In contrast, though poor women may not get education, they are more likely to work outside home in order to contribute to the meagre family income. As scholars have argued that women's economic contribution to family income gives women a measure of empowerment (Blumberg 1991; Browning and Chiaporri 1998), poor families, despite not being exposed to gender egalitarian values, have to include their women in many family decisions.

Social pattern apart, there occurs a regional⁸ pattern of women's participation in decision-making.⁹ Women in the northern, central and eastern regions experience much lower participation than those in the southern and western regions, though a large proportion of women even in the southwest region enjoy a lower level of participation in decision-making (see Table 2). The regional variation in women's participation in decision-making is largely attributed to differing family systems. In the southern region, the family system values daughters both socially and economically. As a result, they are more likely to survive, be educated and exposed to work outside home. Here, women maintain strong family ties even after marriage, which strengthens their position in the affinal family. By contrast, the northerneastern regions are typically patriarchal, with few exceptions patrilocal and widely known for unequal gender relations (Basu 1992; Dyson and Moore 1983; Jeejeebhoy and Sathar 2001). Prevalence of a gender regressive ideology in these regions often discourages much education and employment of women outside the home resulting in lower autonomy and status in the family.

⁸ The regionalisation of Indian states has been done as follows:

northern — Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal and Rajasthan; central — Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh; eastern — Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal; western — Maharashtra, Gujarat; southern — Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Goa. As the study is focused on these five regions, the sample for the northeast region has been excluded from the analysis.

⁹ Of late, studies have emphasised the role of spatial contexts in the production and reproduction of social hierarchies and inequalities. Space contains, creates and constructs around gender relations. Also see McDowell 1999b; Spain 1992; Tickmayer 2000.

It can be said that even as a vast proportion of women get excluded from or enjoy less participation in decision-making, the socio-spatial locations of women seem to significantly influence their participation. However, the documentation of women's participation in decision-making in terms of social groups and spatial contexts is not as straightforward as it appears to be. It is argued that these axes of inequality often do not contribute to gender inequality either positively or negatively independent of each other. They are intertwined; these categories often overlap and interact (Collins 1990). Further, the hypothesised association between social locations of women and their participation in decision-making becomes weak when acquired individual attributes are taken into account. Even this formulation might get fractured when 'spatiality' comes into the picture. Thus, a nuanced understanding of what actually influences women's inclusion in decision-making processes warrants multilayered conceptualisation of social actions and relations and a framework of embeddedness that allows interaction of both structural and individual attributes.

Constraints and Supportive Structures for Women's Decision-making

As pointed out earlier, women are placed in multiple locations, which often overlap and interact and tend to complicate one's understanding of what really contributes to inclusion of women in decision-making processes. It is possible that one factor may emerge stronger in one location, but may be esoteric or may have no relevance in other locations. In order to capture the dynamics of gender inequality in decision-making, OLS (Ordinary Least Squared) regression is used as an analytical statistical tool. OLS regression allows assessing the degree to which independent variables affect the likelihood of participation in decision-making. It also helps rank the relative importance of each of the predictor variables.

The discussion offers some clues as to what can possibly enhance or impede women's participation in decision-making. Yet, treating these factors in isolation and giving any weightage to any variable on the basis of bivariate analysis would be misleading. What follows is an attempt to evaluate the impact of different variables when they interact with one another. In view of the multi-dimensionality of women's decision-making authority, as already seen in the preceding

sections, the ensuing analysis is multi-tiered or multi-layered. In Model 1, independent variables are basically family characteristics. The purpose here is to see how much of women's decision-making power is explained by variables pertaining to family background. Model 2 controls both family and individual attributes of women. Model 3 includes region besides family backgrounds and individual attributes in order to assess the so-called north/east-south/west dichotomy of women's decision-making power. Model 4 assesses the impact of independent variables for regions separately.

It is seen in Model 1 (see Table 9.3) that Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women are more likely to participate in decision-making processes. Muslim women seem to have lesser participation than others. While women of rich families tend to take part in decision-making more than poor women, the partner or spouse's education is an impediment. However, it should be noted that Model 1 that controls for family background explains only .8 per cent of variance ($r^2 = .008$).

When both family background and individual characteristics are controlled, many changes seem to occur (Model 2). One, r^2 , that explains degree of variance, improves dramatically. In other words, individual characteristics appear to be far more powerfully explanatory variables than family background. Second, when both sets of variables interact with each other, the likelihood of participation of Muslim women in decision-making improves significantly. Rahman and Rao (2004) have also made similar observations. Third, women of rich families continue to participate in decision-making more than the women of poor families, but regression coefficients reduce. However, the likelihood of SC and ST women's participation increases tremendously. The result suggests that these changes are due to group differences in individual characteristics. Fourth, though spouse's education impacts negatively, when individual attributes of women come into play, its impact seems to be loosened, suggesting that factors such as education and working status of women mediate with gender ideology.

Of the individual attributes, age by far appears to be the strongest predictor of women's participation in decision-making. As women age, their participation increases for several reasons. One, older women come out of the extended family that undermines their authority (Bloom et al. 2001). Second, longer duration of marriage possibly enables them establish gradual spousal adjustments

TABLE 9.3
Regression Coefficients on Index of Participation in Decision-making

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	
	<i>(Family background)</i>	<i>(Family background + individual characteristics)</i>	<i>(Family background + individual characteristics + region)</i>	<i>North/East</i>	<i>South/West</i>
Family background					
Caste (SC/ST)	.024	.042	.038	.029	.052
Religion (Muslim)	-.005	.012	.014	.020	-.005
Class (Non-poor)	.097	.003	-.012	-.017	.005
Partner's education (Educated)	-.035	-.029	-.029	-.040	-.008
Individual characteristics					
Age	-	.275	.276	.296	.243
Urban	-	.109	.107	.100	.188
Working	-	.058	.042	.034	.061
Education	-	.078	.064	.064	.088
Region (North/East)	-	-	-.076	-	-
R square	.008	.104	.111	.107	.086

Source: Derived from NFHS 2005-2006.

Note: All coefficients are significant at 1 per cent level.

(Sahoo and Raju 2007) thereby acquiring greater ability to negotiate with husbands. On the other hand, in the initial years of marriage they are yet to be fully integrated into their spouse's home and are also unable to cast off the sense of being strangers. They may remain submissive or less demanding of their rights and privileges (Dhruvarajan 1989; Koenig et al. 2006) and hence their less participation in decision-making.

After age, urbanity is the most important factor. This could be attributed to urban women's enhanced access to education and employment (in both formal and informal sectors), which not only make them aware of their rights, but also less dependent on their spouses.

Educational attainment and the working status of women are positively associated with women's participation in decision-making regardless of their social location (see Table 9.3, Model 2). Needless to emphasise, better education frees women from social constraints to assert their rights and privileges and to rise against atrocities (Dreze and Sen 2004: 353). It can also be proposed that better education enables women to handle situations with a greater degree of dexterity. Thus, equipped with better education, women may combine their awareness and articulation of their rights with greater manoeuvring skills, enhanced by education, to bargain and negotiate with patriarchy. Hence, better the education, greater is their say in family matters.

The working status of women is also positively and significantly linked to their participation in decision-making. As working women contribute to the family income, it renders them not only financially independent, but also to decide and make choices for themselves and their families. Women's involvement in economically gainful activities gives them an additional base of power other than reproduction (Blumberg 1991).

However, when spatial dynamics enter the analytical framework, the results bring forth some interesting findings. It appears that region¹⁰ or spatial specificities exert significant influence on women's

¹⁰ Socio-economic and demographic characteristics as well as level of participation of women in decision-making demonstrate two clear regional patterns — states north of the Satpura range hanging together and so do the states lying to the south. For the sake of interpretational convenience here, northern, central and eastern regions have been clubbed together and

participation in decision-making (see Table 9.3, Model 3). Women residing in northern–eastern region are less likely to be participating in decision-making compared to women in the southern–western region when their family background and individual characteristics are controlled for. The results thus endorse the observation made by Dyson and Moore and others.

When all other variables including region are controlled for, education of women appears to play a greater role in enhancing women’s decision-making power. After age and urbanism, education emerges as the third most important factor. The working status of women is also found to positively affect their decision-making power. However, it should be noted that when region is controlled for (see Model 3), the impact of these two factors gets reduced significantly. It suggests that though education and working status of women positively contribute to participation in decision-making across regions, the degree of impact of the two factors varies in terms of spatial contexts. It becomes even more explicit in Model 4. The impact of education and the working status of women is more robust in the southern–western region than those in the northern–eastern region.

The results presented in Model 4 clearly suggest that the impact of familial characteristics is not fixed, rather vulnerable to change under the influence of spatiality. Religion and class seem to be most flexible variables. Overall, when all other variables are controlled, the effect of religious affiliation is diluted. After controlling familial and individual characteristics, Muslim women are more likely to participation in decision-making compared to Hindu women in the northern–eastern region, but the reverse is true in the southern–western region. Similarly, when all other variables including region are controlled, women of the lower classes are more likely to participate in decision-making than those of the upper classes in the northern–eastern region. But the reverse is true in the southern–western part. The results suggest that broad generalisations made by demographers, sociologists and anthropologist need to be questioned.

Although individual characteristics matter in women’s participation in decision-making across regions, their impact varies widely.

so have been south and western regions. However, it must be noted that this scheme of regional convergence and divergence is bound to lose some nuances, which otherwise would have added more vigour to the analysis.

For example, with advancing age, women's participation in decision-making increases much higher than those in the southern–western region, when familial and other individual characteristics are controlled (see Table 9.3, Model 4). Levels of education and working status matter more for women in southern–western region than those in the northern–eastern region.

In brief, the discussion suggests the following. One, the family background of women does not impact women's inclusion in decision-making independent of individually achieved characteristics. Two, the socio-economic factors that condition women's participation in decision-making have different impacts depending upon spatial specificities. Thus, women's participation in decision-making in the family is the function of the interplay of a complex web of factors.

Conclusion

Conventionally, social policy debates on gender equity do not move beyond access to education and employment status ignoring the question of how women's location vis-à-vis men in familial and socio-economic domains is affected. If women's participation in decision-making in the family is considered an important dimension of women's empowerment, the debate on women's empowerment needs to be reframed and restructured. This needs to be done not only because a vast majority of women do not or are unable to participate in the decision-making processes, but also because conventionally understood factors of empowerment such as education and work do not often translate into women's enhanced participation in decision-making processes.

Women's exclusion from decision-making processes is too complex a phenomenon as it demonstrates a multidimensional character. At times, it is the structural determinants whereas at other times, agencies of change emerge as the most powerful explanatory variables. In yet another case, the processes appear to be affected by geographical location. Thus, in a complex mutually constitutive manner, family characteristics, acquired individual attributes such as education and work status and broader structural variables of class and caste interact in consonance with spatially embedded contexts. Out of these, however, spatial characteristics seem to override the influence of other factors as even after controlling for all other variables significantly influencing women's decision-making power,

women in the northern–eastern region of India are far less likely to participate in decision-making than those in the southern–western region. Viewed in this context, women’s participation in decision-making processes calls for further investigation into nuances which are spatially entrenched and are quite distinctive in enhancing or impeding women’s decision-making power, independent of the factors explored and examined in this research.