

Original Article

The Role of Tharu Women in Household Decision-Making: A Socio-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

This study explores the role of Tharu women in household decision-making from a socio-cultural perspective of Birendranagar, Surkhet. Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing gender equality, women's participation in household decision-making remains limited due to deeply rooted patriarchal norms, unequal access to resources, and socio-cultural constraints. The study aims to examine how socio-cultural and economic factors influence the decision-making roles of Tharu women within their household. A descriptive and analytical research design was used based on primary data collected from 50 married Tharu women through structured questionnaires and observation. The findings show that Tharu women are actively involved in household work, agriculture, and income-generating activities, but their independent authority in major decisions remains limited. Men continue to have greater influence over decisions related to household, leadership, property, income, and expenditure, while some decisions are made jointly, by husbands and wives. The findings indicate that women's participation in household activities and income generation does not necessarily result in equal decision-making power. The study concludes that improving women's education, economic opportunities, access to resources, and property rights is important for strengthening their household decision-making power and promoting gender equality among Tharu women.

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Introduction

In today's interconnected world, women's participation is important for social, economic, and family development. However, gender inequality continues to affect women's roles and opportunities in Nepal. Despite legal provisions promoting gender equality, many women still experience limitations in access to resources, economic opportunities, and participation in important decisions (Oli & Woli, 2025). Women perform multiple roles within their households, including domestic work, care work, reproductive responsibilities, and economic activities, but much of their contribution remains unpaid and undervalued (Sinha et al., 2019).

According to Nepal's 2021 Census, the country has 29,164,578, population including 14,253,551 (48.98%) males and 14,911,027 (51.02%) females. Although women slightly increased numbering men, they continue to face discrimination in many areas of life (CBS, 2021). Women's limited access to and control over household and productive resources can affect their ability to participate and influence household decision-making processes (Acharya, 2023). Similarly, gender-based divisions of household and productive work often place a greater burden on women while limiting their opportunities to exercise decision-making power (Oli & Kandel, 2025; Woli & Oli, 2026). Women in Nepal play an important role to household livelihoods and economic activities. They spend considerable time on household responsibilities and income-generating activities but their participation in such activities does not always result in equal authority in household decisions (Woli, 2024). Women's voices are rarely heard when important opinions are needed, and their freedom within the home is limited. Gender inequality is clearly visible in decision-making: while women work more, they have far fewer opportunities to influence the choices that affect their lives and families (Kandel, 2023; Oli & Woli, 2024). In Nepalese society, household roles and decision making practice are influenced by cultural and social norms. These influences can be particularly important among indigenous communities, where traditional practices and changing

social conditions interact in shaping women's roles (Majumder, 2025). The Tharu community provides significant context for examining these issues because Tharu women are actively involved in household responsibilities, agriculture, and other economic activities. However, their participation in major household decisions may remain limited, particularly in areas related to household resources, income, property, and other family matters (Chaudhary et al., 2025).

Despite women's major contribution to household management, agriculture, economic activities, equal participation in household decision-making remains a concern. Nepalese society continues to be influenced by patriarchal norms, where men have traditionally held greater roles in social, economic, and political life (Oli, 2023). In such social settings, men may continue to have greater influence over household leadership, property, income, expenditure, and other important matters. This unequal participation can limit women's autonomy and their ability to influence decisions within the household (Farre, 2013). This issue is relevant to Tharu women because their household and economic responsibilities may not always be accompanied by equal decision-making role. Tharu women in study area are involved in agriculture and household responsibilities, but the extent of their participation in household decision-making and control over resources requires closer examination (Pangali Sharma et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to examine the actual roles of Tharu women in household decision-making and the socio-cultural and economic factors associated with their participation.

Previous studies have studied women's status, gender roles, economic participation, and decision-making in Nepal (Acharya et al., 2010). However, relatively limited attention has been given to the household decision-making roles of Tharu women in the specific context of Birendranagar Municipality, Surkhet. Existing arguments often address women's empowerment and gender inequality in broader national or community contexts, while less attention has been given to the relationship between women's household responsibilities, access to resources, economic participation, and their actual involvement in household decisions among Tharu women (Woli, 2023). This study therefore attempts to address these contextual disparities by examining the household decision making roles of married Tharu women in study area. The study is particularly concerned with women's participation in household decisions related to family matters, treatment, household purchasing, property, income, household leadership, agriculture, and social participation (Akter et al., 2017). Examining these areas provides a clearer understanding of whether women's active contribution to household and economic activities is accompanied by meaningful participation in household decision making (Thapaliya & Pant, 2025).

Research Questions

This study focuses on Birendranagar Municipality, Surkhet to explore how socio-cultural and economic factors outline Tharu women's roles in household decision-making. While existing studies discuss gender roles in Nepal generally, limited research has focused on the Tharu community. By addressing this gap the study aims to contribute to discussion on women's empowerment and ingenious identity in Nepal. The study addressed to answer the resulting research questions:

- What is the level of participation of Tharu women in household decision-making?
- In which household and economic areas do Tharu women participate in decision making?
- How do access to resources, economic participation and socio-cultural factors relate to Tharu women's household decision making roles?

The study aims to examine the role of Tharu women in household decision-making by focusing on socio-cultural and economic factors, including gender roles, cultural practices, household responsibilities, access to resources, and women's participation in family decision-making in Birendranagar Municipality, Surkhet Nepal.

Literature Review

There are differences between women by caste; all women do not have the same position. Nepal's constitution (1990) has guaranteed that there will be no discrimination against any citizen in the application of general laws as well as in respect of political and civil rights, on the grounds of religion, race, sex, and caste. Hence, men and women have equal rights under the constitution to vote, and participate in government or public service (Gurung, 2021).

Women comprised 51 % of the total population of Nepal in 2021. Patriarchy pervades most of the country's castes and ethnic groups; Nepal has one of the highest indices of son preference in the world. Boys not only pass on the family name, but also represent "insurance" for parents in their old age, so that they can carry out important rituals when parents die (Dawadi et al., 2024). Girls generally work at home and in the fields, considered too unimportant and risky to educate, given the high value attributed to virginity and the dangers that schooling in the company of boys and men outside the household might pose to virginity. By contrast, early marriage constitutes a kind of virginity insurance (Khatri & Pokhrel, 2023).

Nepal is a lower-middle-income country with an agriculture-based economy. Most women remain economically dependent, often requiring their male partners' permission to use even their own income (Woli, 2022). Despite this dependency, women are heavily engaged in both domestic chores and socioeconomic activities. They have a major role in household management, and they have to do more than 50 percent of household chores, but they have low decision-making power (Oli, 2025; Magarati and Bist, 2025). Even in the 21st century, they are not enjoying equal decision making power as their male counterpart (Shrestha, 2025). They are discriminated against since their childhood. In childhood, they have to live under their parents, in adulthood, they should follow their husband and in old age they are under their child. They have no liberty to decide freely even their own. Very few women are economically independent, and they have a little bit higher decision making power (K.C., 2021).

The majority of women in Nepal live in rural areas. Rural women, as elsewhere, play multiple roles in the domestic sphere they are household managers, mother, and wives (Zharkevich, 2019). In community, they maintain social and cultural services, predominantly on a voluntary basis, and economy, they are not formally engaged as employees or entrepreneurs (Williams & Nadin, 2012). They are active in family businesses and farming but they have low access to income wealth, and employment, which are the main causes of their low economic status. It directly and indirectly affects their decision-making power (Basnet & Pokhrel, 2023). Traditionally, in the women's responsibilities have been restricted to home cooking, cleaning, child rearing, and looking after the house. Women are considered to be weak, vulnerable, and dependent on men (Madjian & Bras, 2016).

Women's public life is culturally restricted to the degree that it is causally related to the patriarchal social system, which confines them to subordinated position. Religion, ethnicity, law, tradition, history, and social attitudes place severe limits on women's participation in public life, and also control their private lives (Dahal et al., 2022). These factors have both sphered and culture worldview and are governed by a dividend self-image, subsequently affecting the understanding and practice of development (Woli, 2025). This fact is largely evidenced by the reality that a negligible number of Nepalese women are involved in professional, management, and decision making position (Limbu & Shrestha, 2023). The United Nations has defined the status of women in the context of their access to knowledge, economic resources, and political power, and their personal autonomy in the process of decision-making (Porter, 2003). Women from different cast\ethnic group seem to possess better status than women from the Hindu caste group. The dominant Hindu culture and the patriarchal value system of the country have influenced the status of women as their subordinates (Karki et al., 2025).

Decision-making is at the root of every human activity, which involves several stages to reach the final outcome. In rural families, a large number of decisions used to be routine type and did not require much deliberation, but with the changing circumstances, the need for decision-making is also increasing (Shahsavarani et al., 2015). The authority, which is an indicator of the status, wields power to take decision not only pertaining to one but for others too. A king, a tribal chief, and the head of the traditional joint family were supreme in their authority to make decisions pertaining to their group. In this way, the participation in indecision-making reflects the status of any individual, which increases with the growing participation up to the final decisions (Msofi Mgalamadzi et al., 2024). Women were generally not involved in this social process, even in the decision pertaining to the decisions on their own lives and activities. Various studies have defined it as an indicator of their lower status (Hoque & Ithara, 2008).

The status of women report series shows that women in the Terai were equally active in the economic sphere, but their activities were not reported as being economic. In fact, they were active in the household production system, e.g., in food processing and cooking, for farm labor, post-harvesting, cleaning and storing of farm products, kitchen gardening, and cooking food (Khanal, 2021). In addition, women performed domestic chores as unpaid labor, which is not reflected in any economic statistics. As the distinction between activities of outside and inside the household becomes clearer during the process of modernization and urbanization, women tend to be driven towards the household, being confined to reproductive and consumption activities. Such a "domestication of women" may cause a decline in women's decision-making power inside the household (Ragnarsdottir et al., 2023).

Women who are mainly involved in domestic and subsistence activities tend to have less influence in major household economic decisions than women who participate more actively in the market sector (Jabeen et al., 2020). Money earned in the market sector allows women to make a measurable contribution to household income, and thus appears to enhance the perception of women as equal partners (Karki & Thapa, 2021). In addition, women's decision-making input was found to be inversely related to the income status of the household. These outcomes indicate that integrating women into the market economy is not only an efficient use of local resources but also improves women's status and economic security (Gautam, 2021). Women who are victimized and have to live in constant fear cannot participate in development programs designed to benefit tem the mobility of women gets restricted by a vicious circle of threats to their 'purity and physical harm (Moreno et al., 2022). The first step towards the empowerment of women will have to be the guaranteed security of a safe environment for them inside and outside the home as a basic human right (Paudel, 2018).

This study is exposed by the Gender and Development (GAD) Theory, which highlights observing women as energetic agents in social, economic, and household domains rather than inactive recipients. The theory highlights how socio-cultural norms, gender relations, and power inequalities influence women's decision-making roles (Aryal, 2024). In the context of Tharu women in Birendranagar, Surkhet, Gender and Development (GAD) Theory helps to understand how education, income participation, property ownership, and cultural practices outline their intervention and empowerment within households. This theoretical lens supports the analysis of women's roles in household decision-making, illuminating both limitations and occasions for promoting gender equality (Shahi, 2024).

Previous studies have discussed women's gender roles, economic participation, access to resources, and household decision making in Nepal (Rajkarnikar, 2020). However, limited empirical attention has been given to the specific household decision making roles of Tharu women particularly in Birendranagar Municipality Surkhet. Existing studies mainly focus on women in general or broader social contexts, with less attention to Tharu women's participation in household decisions and their gap by examining the household decision making roles of married Tharu women in relation to their socio-cultural and economic conditions (Bam, 2023).

Methodology

This study was conducted in Ward No. 10 of Birendranagar Municipality in Surkhet District. The study area was purposively selected to examine the role of Tharu women household decision-making. The study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design and used quantitative information (Khanal et al., 2025). The study focused on married Tharu women, aged 25 – 65 years, living in the ward. According to the 2074 municipal profile, the ward has 215 households. From these, 50 households were selected using a simple random sampling technique, and married Tharu women from these households were included as respondents.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and direct observations. The questionnaire collected information on respondents' demographic characteristics, household responsibilities, economic activities, access to resources, and participation in household decision-making. Direct observation was used as a supplementary technique to support the information obtained through the questionnaire (Bist, 2026; Bist & Kandel, 2025). In addition, secondary information was obtained from municipal records, related books, journals, and relevant research consulted to support and supplement the data.

Results

Demographic Information of the Respondents

The findings of the study are presented based on the qualitative data collected from the respondents. The findings are organized into given areas demographic characteristics, monthly income and ownership of property and land, political and agricultural participation, health and family planning practices, decision-making in household and social participation, household head, family decision, property, and income control. Frequencies and percentages are used to present the findings in tables.

Table 1: Age, occupation, and educational information of the respondents (n=50)

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age group	25–34	11	22.0
	35–44	13	26.0
	45–54	16	32.0
	55–64	7	14.0
	65+	3	6.0
Occupation	Agriculture	41	82.0
	Labor	5	10.0
	Business	4	8.0
Education	School level	39	78.0
	Graduate & above	11	22.0

The table shows the information about the respondents. Regarding the 32% respondents belonged to age 45 - 54 years, 26% of belonged to the age group of 35 - 44 years, 22% of the respondent belong to the age 25-34 years, 14% of the belong to the age group of 55-64 years, 6% of the belong to the age group of 65 years and above in the study area. This indicates that the majority of the respondents are middle-aged adults. In terms of occupation, 82% of respondents are engaged in agriculture, while 10% are involved in labor and 8% are engaged in business. This suggests that outlining is a significant source of livelihood in the study area. Regarding education, 78% of respondents have completed school-level education, whereas 22% have attained graduate level and above. This shows that basic education is common among participants, while higher education is less common. Overall, the respondents are mostly middle-aged, mainly involved in agriculture, and generally have a basic education.

Distribution of Respondents by Monthly Income and Ownership of Property and Land

Respondents' income from jobs, business, property, or investments indicates their living standard in the study area. Property ownership increases women's confidence, supports their role in household decision-making, and reflects their social status. Therefore, property ownership was examined by comparing those who own assets and those who do not. The respondents were asked about land ownership in their household, and the responses are presented in the following table:

Table 2: Monthly income and Ownership of Property and Land of Respondents

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Monthly income (Rs.)	1,000–2,000	2	4.0
	2,000–4,000	12	24.0
	4,000–6,000	9	18.0
	6,000–10,000	11	22.0
	Above 10,000	16	32.0
Property ownership	Yes	33	66.0
	No	17	34.0
Land ownership	Yes	14	28.0
	No	36	72.0

The table shows the monthly income, property ownership, and land ownership status of the respondents. In terms of monthly income, 32% earn more than Rs. 10,000, indicating that this is the most common income group in the study area.

Similarly, 24% earn Rs. 2,000–4,000, while only 22% earn Rs. 6,000–10,000. About, 18% earn Rs. 4,000–6,000, and only 4% earn Rs. 1,000–2,000. Regarding property ownership, a majority of respondents 66% own property, whereas 34% of the respondents do not own property, indicating that a significant portion still lacks property ownership. Similarly, land ownership is lower; with only 28% have land, and 72% not having land in their name. This shows that land ownership is less common compared to general property ownership in the study area. Overall, the data suggest that while many respondents have property, fewer have land, and most fall within a moderate income range.

Involvement of Respondents in Political Participation and Agriculture

The respondents were asked about their explores the extent to which household members, women participate in political activities and engage in agricultural work, their roles, responsibilities, and contributions in both domains, highlighting how involvement in politics and agriculture affects decision-making, empowerment, and the overall socio-economic status of the household.

Table 3: Political Participation and Agricultural Involvement

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Political participation	Male	12	24.0
	Female	9	18.0
	Both	25	50.0
	Other	4	8.0
Agricultural involvement	Male	0	0.0
	Female	9	18.0
	Both	41	82.0

The study explored respondents' involvement in political participation and agriculture by gender. In politics, 24% were males, 18% females, 50% both, and 8% others. In contrast, agricultural work was predominantly a shared activity; no males worked alone, 18% were females and, 82% worked jointly. These results suggest that political participation is somewhat male-dominated, whereas agricultural work is largely shared within households, reflecting the collaborative nature of households in the study area.

Household Decision-making and Social Participation

In many households, women have less decision-making power than men; spouses prefer to share equal roles and responsibilities, but husbands often dominate family and social decisions. Women typically make decisions. Women typically make decisions about household purchases independently. Social activities are important for personal growth and awareness. The following tables show the decision-making patterns of both spouses regarding household purchases and participation in social activities.

Table 4: Decision-making in purchasing household and social participation

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Decision on treatment	Self	7	14.0
	Husband	17	34.0
	Both	26	52.0
Purchasing household	Self	2	4.0
	Husband	15	30.0
	Both	27	54.0
	Other	6	12.0
Social participation	Religious Activities	9	18.0
	Saving/Cooperative	28	56.0
	Women/Political Groups	13	26.0

The table presents the decision-making patterns of respondents regarding treatment, household purchasing, and social participation. In terms of treatment decisions, 52% of respondents reported joint decision-making between husband and wife, while 34% reported that the husband makes the decision, and only 14% reported making decisions independently. Similarly, for purchasing household items, 54% reported joint decision-making. Followed by 30% where the husband decides, 12% categorized as other and only 4% where women decide independently. Concerning social participation, 56% respondents are involved in saving or cooperative groups, followed by 26% in women or political groups, and 18% in religious activities. This indicates that joint decision-making remains limited, but through their participation in social and community groups is regularly increasing.

Women's Role and Decision-making in Households

The responses regarding the household head indicate that the responsibilities are ideally shared equally, and men often dominate household and social decisions. Women may have limited education, awareness, and opportunities, which can result in dependence on men and reduced control over finances and decision-making. Data on decisions made in other households were also collected, and the responses are shown the following table.

Table 5: *Household leadership, family decision-making, property, and income control*

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Household head	Self	2	4.0
	Husband	44	88.0
	Other	4	8.0
Family decision	Male	10	20.0
	Female	0	0.0
	Both	40	80.0
Decision on selling property	Self	0	0.0
	Husband	24	48.0
	Both	26	52.0
Income control	Husband	15	30.0
	Wife	5	10.0
	Both	30	60.0
Decision on spending income	Self	5	10.0
	Husband	27	54.0
	Both	18	36.0
	Other	0	0.0

The table presents the distribution of respondents based on household guidance, family decision-making, property decisions, and income control. 88% of households are headed by husbands, while only 4% are headed by women, and 8% fall under the categories. Family decision-making is 80%, however 20% remain male-dominated. Decisions on selling property are shared 52%, while 48% are made by husbands, with no independent decisions by women. Income control is also mainly joint 60%, but 30% is controlled by husbands and only 10% by wives. Similarly, in spending income, husbands dominate the 54%, followed by joint decisions 36%, and women's independent decisions 10%. Overall, although joint decision-making exists, men continue to hold a dominant role in major household and financial matters.

Discussion

The findings of this study expose that Tharu women make meaningful contributions to household, agricultural, economic and social activities. Their contributions increasingly reflected in household decision making process. Women's role appear stronger in joint family activities and routine household matters, while men contribute to have more influence over household leadership, property related decisions and the use of income (Gurung, 2021). This finding suggests that women's active participation in household and community activities is an essential aspect of their growing involvement in household decision making. Similar concerns have been identified in previous studies of women's status and household decision making practices (Khatri & Pokhrel, 2023).

The demographic findings indicate that most respondents are middle-aged women who are mainly involved in agriculture and have school level education. This reflects the continuing importance of agriculture in the livelihood of rural household. Women's involvement in agriculture is particularly important because much of their work load contributes directly to household production and family welfare (Khanal, 2021; Oli & Kandel, 2025). However, agricultural and domestic work make valuable contributions to household livelihood, economic well-being and the local economy. Previous research has also shown that women in Nepal contribute significantly to farming, household production, and family management while having comparatively limited access to resources and decision-making authority. Thus, women's substantial contribution to household livelihoods is accompanied by their growing role and influence in household decision-making (Basnet Pokhrel, 2023). Education is an important factor in women's status; limited access to higher education may influence women's access to information, employment, leadership, confidence and household decision-making opportunities. Studies in Nepal have shown a positive relationship between women's education and their participation in household decision-making (Acharya, 2023).

The finding related to property and land ownership shows an important difference between differences between participation and control. Although women may have access to associate with household property, their independent control over and other important resources remains limited. Property ownership is important because it can increase economic security and strengthen women's negotiating position within the household (Dawadi et al., 2024). Previous studies have similarly emphasized the relationship between access to resources and women's empowerment. The findings therefore suggest that improving women's economic position requires not only participation in income generating activities but also greater access to and control over productive resources. The study shows that men and women commonly participate together in agricultural activities. This reflects the important contribution of Tharu women to household production and agriculture. Similar findings were reported by Bam, (2023), who found that Tharu women were actively involved in household and agricultural work, although men often had greater influence over major decisions. This shows that women's active contribution to agriculture provides an essential substance for greater participation in household decision-making.

Women participation in community activities, particularly through savings and cooperative groups, such participation provides opportunities to build social networks, access information, and develop confidence. However, women's participation in political and leadership activities is still limited. Dahal et al. (2022) also noted that sociocultural

and institutional factors influence women's participation in public life. Household leadership and financial matters indicate a stronger role for men. Although women contributions to household work and income, men continue to have more influence on household leadership, property, and financial decisions (Khanal, 2021). This highlights the importance of improving women's access to resources and opportunities for greater participation in household decisions. These findings strongly reflect the Gender and Development (GAD) Theory, which emphasizes that socio-cultural norms, gender relations, and power inequalities shape women's roles and decision-making power (Aryal, 2024). In the study area, traditional beliefs, gender roles, and limited access to resources continue to restrict women's autonomy, even when they actively contribute to household and economic activities (Shahi, 2024).

Overall, the study shows that Tharu women make valuable contributions to their households and communities. While mutual decision making and social participation are increasing, gender disparities remain limited due to low education, restricted access to land and property, and entrenched patriarchal norms. Therefore, improving women's access to education, economic resources, property rights, and leadership opportunities can support more participation in household decisions and promote gender equality.

Conclusion

This study explored the role of Tharu women in household decision-making from a socio-cultural perspective in Birendranagar Municipality-10, Surkhet. The results show that while Tharu women play a crucial role in household management, child care, family care, income, and agricultural activities, yet their participation in decision-making authority remains limited. Most households rely on agriculture, with women contributing more labor than men, but decisions regarding land, seeds, livestock, and household finances are largely controlled by men. While women are more engaged in family planning practices and social or religious activities, their voices are rarely heard in important matters such as education, healthcare, or loans. Education levels are generally low, and landlessness has increased women's economic vulnerability. Despite this, women continue to shoulder responsibilities in food production, livestock care, and household management. The study highlights deep-rooted gender inequalities in decision-making, calling for urgent action through education, economic empowerment, cultural awareness, and policy reform. Therefore, enhancing women's education, property rights, ensuring access to economic resources, and addressing the socio-cultural obstacles are crucial for supporting Tharu women's decision-making power and helping comprehensive improvement in rural Nepal.

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Disclosure Statements

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). The authors read and reviewed the final version and agreed to consent for publication. All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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