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Dalit Women Participation in Household Decision Making: A Study of Aatharai Rural Municipality, Terhathum

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Abstract

This study explores the role of Dalit women in household decision-making in Aatharai Rural Municipality using a positivist paradigm and a descriptive, quantitative research design. Sixty respondents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds were selected through purposive sampling. Data collection involved structured questionnaires, interviews, and secondary sources like reports and census data, analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings show that although Dalit women have relatively good educational attainment, only 5% have higher education. Most live in nuclear families (70%), which affects gender roles. Despite a rise in female-headed households, ownership of houses and land among Dalit women is low (11.67%). Financial independence is limited, with just 8.3% making decisions on harvesting and 13.3% controlling savings. Joint decision-making is common, yet sole financial authority is rare. In social matters like childbirth and marriage, their independent involvement is minimal. The study highlights the need for focused interventions to overcome gender and caste-based inequalities in household decision-making.

Key words: social participation, gender disparity, female ownership, gender and caste barriers, autonomy

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Introduction

Although women constitute a larger proportion of Nepal's total population, they continue to face systematic discrimination across various socio-economic and demographic sectors. Despite their significant contribution to household and community life, women's access to and control over vital resources remain limited. Kabeer (2002), confined to domestic responsibilities, women have experienced limited autonomy in matters such as purchasing goods, selling surplus, accessing markets, education, healthcare, and participating in economic or political decision-making.

According to the 'Muluki Ain, 1854,' Dalits are positioned at the lowest level of the caste hierarchy. The caste system labels Dalit women as inherently impure and untouchable, subjecting them to social exclusion and exploitation. They experience oppression within patriarchal structures, both in society at large and within their own families. Their opportunities to earn income and exercise legal rights are equally constrained. The condition is particularly critical for Dalit women, who are doubly marginalized—by both caste and gender. The caste system, which places Dalits at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Navsarjan, 2013).

Dalit women have lower literacy rates than men, and people of other caste that reduced access to health and education services, limited decision-making roles, and restricted mobility and freedom in both private and public spheres.

According to the 2021 census, Dalits make up 13.4% of Nepal's population. Among them, Hill Dalits account for 8.6%, while 4.8% belong to the Terai Dalit community. Nepal has over 26 Dalit caste groups, with Hill Dalits categorized into seven main castes, including Kami, Damai, Sarki, Badi, and Gaine, while the Terai Dalit community consists of nine distinct castes.

Dalit women face double discrimination - they are oppressed by patriarchy and also by higher caste groups. Even at home, they suffer under male authority. If they were more aware of these injustices, they might have led strong movements for change. In society, their position remains weak, as men control family property (Sunar, 2012).

Dalits face poverty, food insecurity, and restricted access to education, healthcare, and political representation. They also have limited resources and opportunities. According to the 2011 census, the Dalit literacy rate is 52.4%, with women's literacy lower than men's within the community. Dalit women face significant barriers in accessing justice, with widespread impunity for crimes committed by members of dominant caste groups. As a result, they are often targeted for sexual violence and other abuses, as perpetrators frequently escape punishment.

Modernization, globalization, and political movements, including feminism, have influenced women's issues. Since the rise of modernization in 1950 AD, policies and programs have been developed to address gender inequality. Nepal's Women Organization, founded in 1960, focused on social welfare, though not exclusively on women's empowerment.

The "Women in Development" (WID) approach emerged in the 1970s, emphasizing women's equal participation in economic, educational, and employment sectors. However, economic empowerment alone did not resolve gender inequality. This led to the "Women and Development" (WAD) approach, followed by "Gender and Development" (GAD) in the 1990s, which advocated for gender equality and social justice.

Globalization further brought women's issues to a global platform, with national and international agencies working toward gender equality. Nepal participated in various commitments, including the UN declaration of 1975-1985 as the "UN Decade for Women." After the 2062/63 revolution, significant national policies were implemented, including the historic declaration mandating 33% women's participation in all sectors.

NGOs and INGOs continue to support women's empowerment, particularly in rural areas. Despite progress, challenges remain, including Dalit women's role in household decision-making. This gap in sociological research motivates my study on the socio-economic status and decision-making power of Hill Dalit women (Sarki, Kami, and Damai).

The Constitution of Nepal (2072) guarantees Dalit rights by ensuring equality, social justice, political representation, and protection against discrimination. It promotes

proportional inclusivity and active participation through a reservation system that secures the election of a Dalit woman in each of the 6,742 wards across 753 local bodies.

Acharya and Bennett (1981) assert that economic factors influence women's decision-making power both directly and indirectly. Increased economic participation enhances a woman's ability to make decisions. Additionally, social and demographic factors also play a significant role in shaping decision-making processes.

Dalits belong to one of the lowest caste groups and have historically been considered untouchable. Dalit women face compounded discrimination, occupying the lowest position in South Asia's caste, class, and gender hierarchies (Neupane, 2013).

Various women empowerment programs have been introduced, including modernization, feminist movements, political activism, civil war/Maoist war, and approaches like WID, WAD, and GAD. Additionally, movements such as Adhibasi/Janajati Andolan, Mahila Andolan, and Dalit Andolan have focused on women's economic growth, equality, social justice, and rights. The historic revolution of 2062/63 B.S. led to significant changes, including the declaration mandating 33% women's participation in all sectors, encouraging their involvement in decision-making processes. During this period, many NGOs and INGOs worked to empower women in rural areas, launching programs like income-generating activities, skill development, microfinance, and quality education to improve their socio-economic, political, and educational status, as well as access to healthcare and decision-making opportunities. The main aim of the study is to find the role of decision making of Dalit women in Household.

Methodology

The study adopts a positivist research paradigm using quantitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of Dalit women's participation in household decision-making. A descriptive research design was employed to analyze existing patterns and trends in household decision-making among Dalit women.

The study was conducted with a sample size of 60 respondents, selected through purposive sampling, ensuring representation of Dalit women across different socio-

economic backgrounds in Aatharai Rural Municipality, Terhathum. Both primary and secondary data were used. Primary data was collected through structured questionnaires and interviews, capturing firsthand perspectives. Secondary data was gathered from reports, census data, and previous studies related to gender dynamics in Nepal. The study employed surveys and interviews to obtain quantitative data. Collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, ensuring clarity in understanding percentage distributions and trends.

Result Analysis

This study explores Dalits women's involvement in financial, agricultural, and family-related decision-making process in Aatharai Rural Municipality, Terhathum. It examines education levels, property ownership, and household authority to provide insights into social inclusion, gender equity, and policy development aimed at enhancing their role in household decision-making.

Table no.1

The Socio-economic Status of Dalit Women in the Study Area.

Education of Respondents		Number	Percent
	Illiterate	12	20.0
	Basic	26	43.3
	Secondary	19	31.7
	Higher	3	5.0
	Total	60	100.0
Family size of Respondents		Number	Percent
	Seculars	42	70.0
	Joint	18	30.0
	Total	60	100.0
Ownership of House		Number	Percent
	Women/ wife	7	11.67
	Male or Husband	35	58.33
	Both	2	3.33
	Others	7	11.67
	No	9	15.00
	Total	60	100.0
Land ownership		Number	Percent
	Yes	46	76.7

	No	14	23.3
	Total	60	100.0
Income and saving			
	No	21	35.0
	less than one lakh	25	41.7
	1-3 lakh	14	23.3
	Total	60	100.0

Sources: Field Survey, 2082

The education level of the respondents varies significantly, with the largest group (43.3%) having basic education, followed by 31.7% who completed secondary education. A smaller percentage (20.0%) is illiterate, while only 5.0% have higher education. This suggests that while most respondents have received some level of formal education, higher education remains less common. Regarding family structure, nuclear families are predominant, making up 70.0% of the respondents, while joint families account for the remaining 30.0%. In terms of house ownership, the majority (58.33%) of homes are owned by men or husbands, whereas ownership by women or wives is notably lower at 11.67%. Joint ownership between spouses is rare, with only 3.33% reporting shared ownership. Meanwhile, 15.00% of respondents do not own a house. As for land ownership, a significant majority (76.7%) of respondents own land, while 23.3% do not. This indicates a high rate of land possession among the surveyed individuals, which could have implications for economic stability and decision-making within households.

Table no. 2

Decision Making of Dalit Women in Different issues.

Decision of harvest		Number	Percent
	Women/ wife	5	8.3
	Male or Husband	17	28.3
	Both	36	60.0
	Others	2	3.3
	Total	60	100.0
Decision of saving			
	Women/ wife	8	13.3
	Male or Husband	16	26.7
	Both	36	60.0

	Total	60	100.0
Decision of taking loan			
	Women/ wife	7	11.7
	Male or Husband	30	50.0
	Both	21	35.0
	Others	2	3.3
	Total	60	100.0
Decison to Expenditure of saving			
	Women/ wife	14	23.3
	Male or Husband	19	31.7
	Both	27	45.0
	Total	60	100.0
Decision of saving			
	Women/ wife	8	13.3
	Male or Husband	16	26.7
	Both	36	60.0
	Total	60	100.0
Decision taking loan			
	Women/ wife	7	11.7
	Male or Husband	30	50.0
	Both	21	35.0
	Others	2	3.3
	Total	60	100.0
Decide to expenditure for festival celebration			
	Women/ wife	17	28.3
	Male or Husband	19	31.7
	Both	24	40.0
	Total	60	100.0
Decision to participate in social Activates			
	Women/ wife	13	21.7
	Male or Husband	19	31.7
	Both	28	46.7
	Total	60	100.0
Decide to birth of son or daughter			
	Women/ wife	10	16.7
	Male or Husband	18	30.0
	Both	32	53.3
	Total	60	100.0

Decide to Married of son or daughter			
	Male or Husband	14	23.3
	Both	46	76.7
	Total	60	100.0

Sources: Field survey, 2082

The decision-making power of Dalit women, as reflected in this data, highlights their role in various aspects of household and financial management. In agricultural decisions, only 8.3% of Dalit women independently decide when to harvest crops, while the majority of decisions are either made by men (28.3%) or jointly by both spouses (60.0%). This suggests that while women participate, their independent influence in agricultural decisions remains limited. Regarding financial decisions, 13.3% of Dalit women have sole authority over savings, whereas most households (60.0%) make savings-related choices together. Similarly, decisions about taking loans are largely controlled by men (50.0%), with only 11.7% of women exercising independent control. However, 35.0% of households decide on loans jointly, indicating some level of shared financial power.

Women's role in expenditure decisions shows a higher level of influence, particularly in spending savings (23.3%) and festival-related expenses (28.3%). Although men maintain a significant share of decision-making authority, the frequency of joint decisions suggests a cooperative approach rather than absolute control by either gender. When it comes to participation in social activities, 21.7% of Dalit women independently decide to engage, though joint decisions remain prevalent (46.7%). In major family-related decisions, such as childbirth (16.7%) and marriage arrangements (23.3%), women's independent involvement is relatively lower, with husbands or both spouses largely responsible. Notably, 76.7% of decisions regarding a child's marriage are made jointly, signifying that while women may not always act alone, their input is considered.

Overall, the data illustrates that while Dalit women have some autonomy in household and financial matters, their independent decision-making power remains constrained. Most significant decisions—whether financial, agricultural, or social—are made either by men or jointly, reflecting ongoing gender dynamics within the household.

This suggests that while progress has been made in recognizing women's roles, further efforts are necessary to empower Dalit women in independent decision-making.

Discussion

The education level among respondents shows a significant variation, 80 percent Dalit women which is higher than the national level women education 69.4 %) and Hill Dalit (75.7%) but higher education is only five percent. These trends align with broader national statistics, indicating ongoing challenges in ensuring higher educational accessibility for women. Regarding household structure, nuclear families dominate (70.0%), suggesting a shift towards smaller family units, which can influence gender roles and decision-making dynamics.

There is a significant gender disparity in house and land ownership, with 58.33% of homes being owned by men or husbands, while only 11.67% are under female ownership. Over the years, the prevalence of female-headed households in Nepal has steadily risen, increasing from 15% in 2001 to 25.7% in 2011, and reaching 31.5% in 2021, indicating gradual shifts in household dynamics and gender roles (NSO, 2021). Women's ownership of land and housing units has seen a rise. However, the 2021 census revealed that a significant majority—74.6%—still do not have property or land officially registered in their names.

The study highlights that Dalit women are independent the decision-making power - particularly in agriculture and finances - remain limited. Only 8.3% independently decide on harvesting and just 13.3% control savings. In contrast, joint decision-making is dominant, suggesting a shift toward shared responsibilities, but still constrained autonomy.

When compared with the NDHS 2022 national data, joint financial decision-making is a broader trend. Nationally, 54% of men report deciding with their wives on how to use their earnings, and 49% of women report joint decision-making regarding their own earnings, signaling a consistent pattern across different social groups. However, Dalit women lag in areas of sole authority. While nationally 44% of women control their earnings, only 11.7% of Dalit women independently decide on loans, and just 23.3%

decide on spending savings. This contrast highlights the intersectional disadvantage Dalit women face due to both gender and caste.

In social and family decisions, Dalit women show moderate involvement. For instance, 21.7% independently decide on social participation, while 16.7% and 23.3% influence childbirth and marriage decisions respectively. These figures suggest gradual progress, yet underscore persistent gaps in areas of personal and familial autonomy. In essence, while national trends reflect growing joint decision-making, Dalit women remain underrepresented in independent decision spheres, indicating a need for more targeted empowerment interventions that address both gender and caste barriers.

Conclusion

The study highlights both progress and ongoing challenges faced in Dalit women for their empowerment. While education levels have improved, even though they have limited access to higher education. Property and land ownership continue to be male-dominated, only a small percentage of land ownership to Dalit women holding independent rights. Decision-making within households is often joint but Dalit women still struggle for autonomy in agricultural, financial, and social matters. Although participation in financial decisions is increasing, independent control remains constrained. Comparisons with national data suggest that Dalit women face additional disadvantages due to both gender and caste, leading to lower financial and social autonomy. While joint decision-making signals inclusivity, efforts must be directed toward increasing independent control over resources, economic activities, and household affairs for Dalit women. Empowering Dalit women requires expanding education access, strengthening property rights, promoting financial inclusion, encouraging household decision-making, supporting social participation, addressing intersectional barriers, and enforcing legal protections for equality and independence.

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