



RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIO DEMOGRAPHIC DETERMINANTS OF WOMEN'S AUTONOMY: A STUDY AMONG  
MARRIED EMPLOYED WOMEN IN TWO NORTHERN DISTRICTS OF BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

This study was set out to explore the socio-demographic factors affecting women's autonomy in decision-making process among married employed women in two northern districts named *Dinajpur* and *Thakurgaon* of Bangladesh. Data was collected from 150 married employed women for sampling purposes using random sampling technique. The analysis revealed that, overall 24% of the employed women participated in all the three areas of decision-making (i.e. freedom of movement, decision-making regarding children, and HH task and decision making), 38% percent involved in any two areas of decision-making, 26% percent participated in at least one area of decision-making and rests (12%) were not participated in any areas of decision-making. Results also found that, 46.0% women had autonomy to make decision about their movement, 67.3% women had autonomy to make decision regarding children take care and 63.3% women had autonomy to make decision about household task and decision. The study results showed that mainly age of women, occupation of women, women's monthly income, age of husband, occupation of husband, husband's monthly family expenditure from own income, and total monthly family expenditure are significantly associated with married employed women's autonomy in decision-making process.

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INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is one of the developing countries of the world. Like all other developing countries, it is not free from a lot of problems like economic backwardness, high illiteracy, over population and so on. Most of the Bangladeshi families are still not out of the traditional social norms and customs. Ultimately, the origins of gender bias are social norms and traditions, which still are in existence in most of the families of the country. The gender belief on this aspect is that women are born only to be inside the household, to continue with their reproductive capacity, to look after children, to cook for the family members and to do all other works inside the homesteads. They are not recommended to engage in economic activities. They have limited access to household decision making, physical and financial assets. Both decision-making powers and economic control are vested in the hands of men as the household authority. Women are particularly unlikely to make independent decisions related to freedom of mobility, buying or selling of real estate, fertility control, children's education, on the greatest say in children's marriage.

Autonomy indicates the ability-technical, social, and psychological - to obtain information and to use it as a basis for making decisions about one's private concerns and those of one's intimates (Dyson and Moore, 1983). Women's autonomy is defined as "the ability of women to make choices/decisions within the household relative to their husband's" (Anderson and Eswaran, 2009). Women's active participation at all levels of decision making is important in order to achieve equality and peace in family as well as the country. Employment and education have always empowered women and brought a positive impact on decision making, including reducing the inequalities among men and women. Married Women having paid work and education are more likely to participate in decision making (Roth and Mbzyo, 2001). Denise and Gerald further tested Blood and Wolf's theory of resources in family decision-making power through survey research among Danish and American families. The research showed that wife's employment whether fulltime or part-time play an important role to increase her decision-making power in family (Denise and Gerald, 1972). Dominant development policy approaches recommend women's employment on the grounds that it facilitates their empowerment, which in turn is believed to be instrumental in enhancing women's well-being. Bangladesh Government has been continuously adopting of the preemptive policies, legislations, strategies and taking national affirmative action plans and program for accelerating the implementation

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process in achieving the goal of holistic empowerment of women. The present study was designed to review the status of women's autonomy in decision-making and to find out the factors that might affect women's autonomy in decision-making. The specific aims of the study were, 1. to examine autonomy status and decision-making power of women at household level, 2. to find out the association of women's autonomy in decision making and different socio-demographic and economic characteristics, 3. to determine the factors that might affect women's decision-making power at the household level.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study area

The present study was conducted in the two selected districts in Northern Bangladesh viz., Dinajpur and Thakurgaon. Due to time and resources constraints, the inclusion of more districts of the country for the investigation of married employed women was not possible.

### Sampling and sample size

Due to unavailability of the sampling frame for this type of research regarding married employed women, the method of cluster sampling technique was done to draw a useful random sample. The study area covered several clusters according to the density of the employed women. Among all the clusters, 6 (six) clusters were selected using simple random sampling procedure. From the selected clusters, respondents of married employed women were selected randomly. The sample size for the study was calculated by assuming the prevalence of women's autonomy 60% and allowable error of 10%. The calculated sample size was 130 and the adjusted sample size was 156 (allowing 20% non-response rate). The targeted sample size was 160 for the study, but a total of 150 women responded, who were finally included in this study for analysis.

### Measurement of Women's autonomy

Women's autonomy index was assessed through three areas of decision-making which are freedom of movement, decision-making regarding children and HH tasks and decision. For each of these three areas of decision-making, women were asked who usually makes the decisions. Each question had three response options: respondent alone (employed women), respondent and husband (both), and others. We created a binary variable for each type of decision-making by grouping together the first two responses in which women participate in decision-making (coded as 1, and other responses together in which she has no say in decision-making, coded as 0).

### Statistical analysis

Data of filled up questionnaires for this study were computerized in Statistical Package for Social Science (IBM SPSS 22.0) software. Univariate analysis is done to know the frequency distribution and descriptive statistics of the selected study variables to realize the sample data. Point-biserial correlation is used to measure the strength and direction of the association that exists between one continuous variable and another one for dichotomous variable. Logistic regression is used to explain the relationship between one dependent binary variable and one or more metric (interval or ratio scale) independent variables.

## RESULTS

### Socio-demographic and economic characteristics of married employed women's families

Regarding the age groups, 14.0%, 58.7%, 18.0%, and 9.3% of respondent's was in the age group of less than 30 years, 30-39 years, 40-49 years and 50 and above years respectively. The majority of women (60.7%) had university level education, while 28.0% had school level education and 11.3% had college level education. Occupation of respondent, about 25.3% of respondent's occupation was teaching, 37.3% was working in NGO/Private/Bank and 37.3% was working as Govt. officer and staff. Respondent's monthly income, 30.7% of respondent's monthly income was up to 6000 Tk., 34.0% in the range of 6001-12000 Tk. and 35.3% in the range of 12001 Tk. and above. About, 42.7% of respondents monthly family expenditure from own income was up to 5000 Tk., 31.3% was in the range of 5001-10000 Tk. and 26.0% was in the range of 10001 Tk. and above.

The majority of the women were between 18-24 years old when they got married, 33.3% of women reported that they were younger than 18 when they got married. Marital duration up to 4 years was found in 10.0% of respondents, 5-9 years was found in 21.3% respondents and rest 10 and above years was in 68.7% respondents. At the point of religion, 75.3% of respondents were Muslim, and 24.7% were Hindu and others. About 76.0% of households had single family and 24.0% combined family. Majority of the women respondents were living in urban areas (82 percent).

In case of husband's age, 4.0%, 35.6%, 38.0% and 22.7% was in the age group less than 30 years, 30-39 years, 40-49 years and 50 and above years respectively. More than half of the husband's (59.3%) education level was university, 27.3% school, and 13.3% college. Occupation of husband, 14.0% of husband's occupation was teaching, 10.7% Govt. officer and staff, 30.7% Bank/NGO/Private and 44.7% business. Husband's monthly income, 24.0% of husbands monthly income was up to 6000 Tk., 22.0% in the range of 6001-12000 Tk., 18.7% in the range of 12001-18000 Tk. and 35.3% in the range of 18001 Tk. and above. About, 20.0% of husbands monthly family expenditure from own income was up to 5000 Tk., 43.3% was in the range of 5001-10000 Tk. and 36.7% was in the range of 10001 Tk. and above. About 20.7% of household's monthly expenditure was 2000-10000 Tk., 46.7% in the range of 10001-20000 Tk. and rest 32.7% in the range of 20001 Tk. and above (Table 1).

### Women's autonomy status

Women's autonomy status assessed through participation in the three areas of decision-making: freedom of movement, decision-making regarding children, and HH tasks and decision. From the analysis of women's participation in decision-making Figure 1 shows that, overall 24% of the women were participated in all the three areas of decision-making, 38% in two areas of decision-making, and 26.0% participated in at least one of the three areas of decision-making (i.e. freedom of movement, decision-making regarding children, and HH task and decision). Figure 2 shows, 46.0% women had autonomy to make decision about their movement, 67.3% women had autonomy to make decision regarding children take care and 63.3% women had autonomy to make decision about household task and decision.

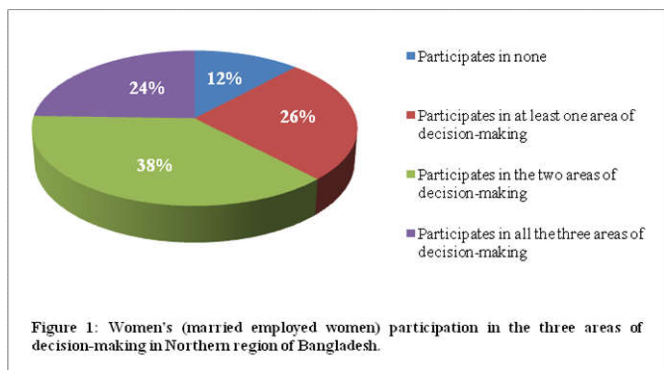


Figure 1: Women's (married employed women) participation in the three areas of decision-making in Northern region of Bangladesh.

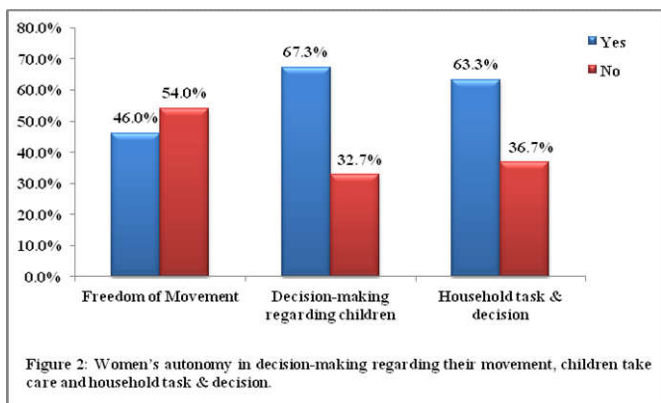


Figure 2: Women's autonomy in decision-making regarding their movement, children take care and household task & decision.

Table 2 indicates, the husband's monthly income and total monthly family expenditure were positively correlated with autonomy of movement and respondent's monthly income was positively correlated with autonomy of decision-making regarding children take care and HH task and decision. Table 3 represents the association between different socio-demographic and economic characteristics and women's autonomy in decision-making areas in Northern region of Bangladesh.

Odds for autonomy of movement were 2.4 and 4.3 times higher for the women who had college and university level education respectively with respect to women who had school level education. Odd for autonomy of movement was 2.6 times higher for the women who employed as Officer-staff (Govt. / Bank / NGO / Private) with respect to women with teacher profession. Odd for autonomy of movement was 6.3 times higher for the women whose monthly income was 12001 Tk. and above with respect to women whose monthly income was up to 6000 Tk. Odds for autonomy of movement were 6.2 and 3.4 times higher for the women whose monthly family expenditure from own income were up to 5000 Tk. and 5001-10000 Tk. respectively with respect to 10001 Tk. and above.

Table 5 shows the results of binary logistic regression analysis of significant studied factors for autonomy of decision-making about household task and decision among married employed women in North-Western region of Bangladesh. Results reveal that, odd for autonomy of household task and decision making process for the women was 3.9 times higher who were teacher with respect to other profession. Odd for autonomy of household task and decision making process was 3.9 times higher for the women with single family with respect to combined family. Odd for autonomy of household task and decision making process was 2.7 times higher for the urban women with respect to rural women. Odds for autonomy of household task and decision making process were 3.7 and 4.6 times higher for the women whose husbands were in the age groups 35-44 years and 45 and above years respectively with respect to women whose husbands age were less than 35 years. And odd for autonomy of household task and decision making process was 2.8 times higher for the women whose husbands were officer-staff (Govt./Bank/NGO/Private) with respect to women whose husbands were teacher.

Table 1: Socio-demographic & economic characteristics of the selected married employed women's families in Northern region of Bangladesh

Variables	Categories	No.	%
Age of respondent (years)	Less than 30	21	14.0
	30-39	88	58.7
	40 -49	27	18.0
	50 & above	14	9.3
Education level of respondent	School	42	28.0
	College	17	11.3
	University	91	60.7
Occupation of respondent	Teacher	38	25.3
	Bank/NGO/Private	56	37.3
	Govt. officer & staff	56	37.3
Respondent's monthly income (Tk.)	Up to 6000	46	30.7
	6001-12000	51	34.0
	12001 and above	53	35.3
Respondent's Monthly family expenditure from own income (Tk.)	Up to 5000	64	42.7
	5001-10000	47	31.3
	10001 and above	39	26.0
Respondent's age at the time of present marriage (Years)	<18	50	33.3
	18-24	67	44.7
	25-29	25	16.4
	>30	8	5.3

Table 4 indicates the results of binary logistic regression analysis of significant studied factors for freedom of movement among married employed women in Northern region of Bangladesh. Results shows that, odd for autonomy of movement was 6.6 times higher for the women who were in age group 40 and above years with respect to less than 30 years.

### DISCUSSION

With respect to the first aim of the study we found that, overall 24% of the women were autonomous to participate in all the three areas of decision-making, 38% in two areas of decision-making, and 26.0% in at least one of the three areas of decision-making (i.e. freedom of movement, decision-making regarding children, or HH task and decision).

Table 1: (continued)

Variables	Categories	No.	%
Marital duration (years)	Up to 4	15	10.0
	5-9	32	21.3
	10 & above	103	68.7
Religion	Hindu & others	37	24.7
	Muslim	113	75.3
Family structure	Single family	114	76.0
	Combined family	36	24.0
Place of residence	Rural village	27	18.0
	Urban	123	82.0
Age of husband (years)	Less than 30	6	4.0
	30-39	53	35.6
	40-49	57	38.0
	50 & above	34	22.7
Education level of husband	School	41	27.3
	College	20	13.3
	University	89	59.3
Occupation of husband	Teacher	21	14.0
	Govt. officer & staff	16	10.7
	Bank/NGO/Private	46	30.7
	Business	67	44.7
Husband's monthly income (Tk.)	Up to 6000	36	24.0
	6001-12000	33	22.0
	12001-18000	28	18.7
	18001 & above	53	35.3
Husband's monthly family expenditure from own income (Tk.)	Up to 5000	30	20.0
	5001-10000	65	43.3
	10001 & above	55	36.7
Total monthly family expenditure (Tk.)	Up to 10000	31	20.7
	10001-20000	70	46.7
	20001 & above	49	32.7

Table 2: Point-biserial correlation among different socio-demographic &amp; economic variables and women's autonomy in decision-making in Northern region of Bangladesh

Variables	Autonomy of movement	Children take care	HH task and decision
	$r_{pb}$	$r_{pb}$	$r_{pb}$
Respondent's monthly income (Tk.)	0.080 <sup>NS</sup>	0.182*	0.179*
Age of husband (years)	0.126 <sup>NS</sup>	-0.087 <sup>NS</sup>	0.116 <sup>NS</sup>
Husband's monthly income (Tk.)	0.169*	0.078 <sup>NS</sup>	0.038 <sup>NS</sup>
Total monthly family expenditure (Tk.)	0.178*	0.112 <sup>NS</sup>	0.041 <sup>NS</sup>

Note: Level of significance: \* $p < 0.05$  and <sup>NS</sup> $p =$  Not significant

Table 3: Women's autonomy in decision-making in the three areas by measures of socio-economic status and demographic characteristics

Variable	Categories	Autonomy of decision-making					
		Freedom of Movement		Children take care		HH task and decision	
		No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)
Age of respondent (years)	Less than 30	16.0	11.6	18.4	11.9	20.0	10.5
	30-39	61.7	55.1	51.0	62.4	58.2	58.9
	40-49	14.8	21.7	24.5	14.9	14.5	20.0
	50 & above	7.4	11.6	6.1	10.9	7.3	10.5
	Chi square	2.502 <sup>NS</sup>		4.223 <sup>NS</sup>		3.207 <sup>NS</sup>	
Education level of Respondent	School	38.3	15.9	34.7	24.8	30.9	26.3
	College	11.1	11.6	12.2	10.9	10.9	11.6
	University	50.6	72.5	53.1	64.4	58.2	62.1
	Chi square	9.574**		1.912 <sup>NS</sup>		0.365 <sup>NS</sup>	
Occupation of respondent	Teacher	29.6	20.3	20.4	27.7	16.4	30.5
	Bank/NGO/Private	28.4	47.8	26.5	42.6	45.5	32.6
	Govt. officer & staff	42.0	31.9	53.1	29.7	38.2	36.8
	Chi square	6.068*		7.793*		4.309 <sup>NS</sup>	
Respondent's monthly income (Tk.)	Up to 6000	40.7	18.8	36.7	27.7	38.2	26.3
	6001-12000	35.8	31.9	36.7	32.7	34.5	33.7
	12001 & above	23.5	49.3	26.5	39.6	27.3	40.0
	Chi square	13.025**		2.630 <sup>NS</sup>		3.204 <sup>NS</sup>	
Respondent's monthly family expenditure from own income (Tk.)	Up to 5000	44.4	40.6	49.0	39.6	49.1	38.9
	5001-10000	28.4	34.8	28.6	32.7	32.7	30.5
	10001 & above	27.2	24.6	22.4	27.7	18.2	30.5
	Chi square	0.707 <sup>NS</sup>		1.210 <sup>NS</sup>		2.935 <sup>NS</sup>	

**Table 4. Result of binary logistic regression analysis of significant studied factors for freedom of movement among married employed women in Northern region of Bangladesh**

Variables	Categories	P-value	OR (95% CI)
Age of respondent (years)	Less than 30 (RC)		1.00
	30-39	0.265	2.023(0.586 - 6.982)
	40 & above	0.010	6.634**(1.575 - 27.95)
Education level of respondent	School (RC)		1.00
	College	0.040	2.440*(0.728 - 8.178)
	University	0.015	4.327**(1.132 - 16.54)
Occupation of respondent	Teacher (RC)		1.00
	Officer & staff (Govt. / Bank / NGO / Private)	0.039	2.590*(1.052 - 6.379)
Respondent's monthly income (Tk.)	Up to 6000 (RC)		1.00
	6001-12000	0.113	2.961(0.775 - 11.32)
	12001 & above	0.005	6.347**(1.512 - 26.65)
Respondent's monthly family expenditure from own income (Tk.)	Up to 5000	0.002	6.165**(1.536 - 24.75)
	5001-10000	0.017	3.350*(1.142 - 9.826)
	10001 & above (RC)		1.00

Note: Level of significance: \*\*p<0.01 and \*p<0.05

**Table 5. Result of binary logistic regression analysis of significant studied factors for autonomy of decision-making about household task & decision among married employed women in Northern region of Bangladesh**

Variables	Categories	P-value	OR (95% CI)
Occupation of respondent	Teacher	0.012	3.865**(1.343 - 11.12)
	Officer & staff(Govt./ Bank/NGO/Private)(RC)		1.00
Family structure	Single family	0.002	3.894**(1.666 - 9.101)
	Combined family (RC)		1.00
Place of residence	Rural (RC)		1.00
	Urban	0.054	2.721*(0.967 - 7.660)
Age of husband (years)	Less than 35 (RC)		1.00
	35-44	0.023	3.709*(1.200 - 11.46)
	45 & above	0.011	4.605**(1.423 - 14.90)
Occupation of husband	Teacher	0.862	1.107(0.349 - 3.506)
	Officer & staff(Govt./Bank/NGO/Private)	0.019	2.761*(1.179 - 6.464)
	Business (RC)		1.00

Note: Level of significance: \*\*p<0.01 and \*p<0.05

Also 46.0% women had autonomy to make decision about their movement, 67.3% women had autonomy to make decision regarding children take care and 63.3% women had autonomy to make decision about household task and decision. As considering our aims, many of socio-demographic and economic factors affected significantly the autonomy of women to take part in the decision-making process in the household. There is a significant positive association between women's age and autonomy in decision making, women with age group 40 and above years were more autonomous to make decision about their movement and HH task and decision compared to the women with age group less than 30 years. In Nepal, Bangladesh and India, as women get older they gain autonomy in household decision making (Acharya *et al.*, 2010; Senarath and Gunawardena, 2009). Education level is hardly associated with autonomy of decision-making inside or outside the household. Higher educated women had more autonomy of movement than the lower educated women. As increasing the education level, autonomy of movement increases. Various studies supported the view that education play a positive role in raising women's perceptions in decision-making power (Senarath and Gunawardena, 2009; Sultana, 2011; Wiklander, 2010; Sathar and Kazi, 2000). Classification of women's employment and monthly income are significantly associated with women's autonomy in decision-making. Women working in teaching profession enjoyed less independence in decision-making regarding movement and children take care than the women of others profession category. Monthly income level of women altered women independence in decision making, women getting higher salaries exercised greater control on her movement. Across all autonomy outcomes, family pattern and place of residence are associated with women's autonomy in decision-making.

Women of nuclear or single family were more autonomous than extended or combined families. As far as residence is concerned rural women were less likely to participate in decision-making than urban women (Senarath and Gunawardena, 2009; Sathar and Kazi, 2000; Awan, 2015; Acharya *et al.*, 2010). With respect to husband's characteristics, husband's age had significant effect on women's autonomy in decision-making. Women whose husband's age more than 35 years enjoyed more autonomy in decision-making compared to the women whose husband's age less than 35 years. In case of husband's education level, women whose husband's education level was at university were felt more autonomous in decision-making about their movement than other education levels of husbands. And also husband's occupation has significant effect on women's autonomy in decision-making. Women whose husband employed as officer-staff (Govt./Bank/NGO/Private) enjoyed more autonomy to make decision about household task and decision compared to other occupation.

## Conclusion

The study was carried out to identify the factors affecting women's autonomy in decision-making among married employed women. Many of socio-demographic and economic factors affected significantly the autonomy of women to take part in the decision-making process in the household. The study showed that age, education, family pattern, place of residence, occupation, and incomes have significant effect in explaining the variance in household decision-making power. Improving women's autonomy is a global development priority.

Employment and education have always empowered women and brought a positive impact on decision making, including reducing the inequalities among men and women. A comprehensive strategy must be required that could raise women's gender consciousness, enable them to access community resources and provide support for challenging traditional norms which cause gender inequalities. Overall, enhancing their access to and control over economic resources and enabling them to establish and realize their rights are also essential means to empower them to be more autonomous in decision making.

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