

## **Role of Women in Decision Making and Economic Contribution at Household Level<sup>1</sup>**

*S.M. Ikhtiar Alam<sup>2</sup>*

### **I. Introduction**

It is a common knowledge to all of us that the roles of women in both decision making at household level and economic contribution to household income are insignificant, particularly in developing countries. In developing countries, society is, in general, male dominated in terms of participation in household decision making as well as in terms of economic contribution. It is a traditional belief that generally males make all major household decisions and at the same time they contribute to household income more than females, and thus, our society is highly male dominated, which is popularly known as **gender bias against female**. But if we systematically analyze these two aspects of **male dominance**, this traditional belief may seem to be wrong. The present paper examines the pure gender bias and the impact of economic contribution to household income on the participation rates of male and female members in the decision making process at the household level from a different point of view with the help of some new analytical tools using primary data collected from some selected villages of rural Bangladesh. The present study finds that **there is a strong positive correlation between an individual member's participation in household decision making process and his/her economic contribution to household income in addition to "pure gender bias"**. In other words, a person makes various household decisions not only because the person is a male or a female, but also because s/he contributes more to the household income. That is, if a person contributes more to household income, s/he participates more in household decision making, irrespective of his/her gender. We find that as female contribution rate to household income increases, its participation rate in household decision making also increases almost proportionately.

---

<sup>1</sup> A similar theoretical paper titled "**Residual Claim Hypothesis and Decision Making Process at Household Level: Gender Bias and the Effect of Economic Contribution to Household Income**" was presented by the author at a seminar on "Rural & Agricultural Development" in Economics Department, Boston University, USA in August 1988 (No. GRS EC931S).

<sup>2</sup> The author is an Associate Professor, Economics & Business, Independent University, Bangladesh.

The same is found also for male members. Women although do not contribute directly to household income more than male members, they do contribute a huge indirect economic contribution to household income through informal economic and peripheral developmental activities. At the same time, the contribution of women — direct and indirect — may be less than that of males, but the rate of women's participation in major household decision making is more than the rate of their direct economic contribution to household income.

But, on the other hand, at village level the gender dominance is opposite. The rural power structure is concentrated in the hands of few males who are highly influential and quite rich and in most cases they belong to a particular clan. Role of women at village level in various socio-economic and political activities or in decision making (e.g., dispute resolution) is very insignificant. Over time, interventions of government organizations and, NGOs have changed the rural society to a significant extent in terms of awareness raising, income, education, functional skill development, etc., but the power structure at village level has not changed and as a result, **at the village level the rural society is, still highly male dominated.** The changes which are taking place at household level have failed to create any **spillover effect** at village level. On the other hand, it is a traditional belief that the rural power structure at village level which is highly male dominated creates spillover effect on participation rates of males and females in decision making at household level. But the present study does not find any such spillover effects at all. Therefore, the present study finds that **at household level the rural society of Bangladesh is not male dominated, it is rather female dominated in terms of their relative participation rate in household decision making process vis-a-vis their relative economic contribution rate, but at the village level the rural society is still highly male dominated.** However, the present study does not take into account other aspects of gender bias such as dowry, physical torture, and other cultural aspects.

## II. Methodology and Data source

The present study used cross-section primary data collected in 1996 from three CVDP (**Comprehensive Village Development Programme**) villages of the **Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD)** and three **non-CVDP** villages in Comilla district. The CVDP villages were selected by considering the distance and communication facilities from the Comilla city to these villages, and the expected cooperation from the

members of the CVDP. Among the non-CVDP villages the author selected a cluster of three villages which are neighbors of one another and in which BARD had almost no influence - socially or institutionally - for the purpose of this study. In selecting these non-CVDP villages, the village boundary was taken into consideration so these three villages together formed a single cluster village and at the same time the CVDP villages were really separated from the non-CVDP village cluster in the sense that there were no spill-over effects of CVDP on these non-CVDP villages. The distance and communication facilities from the Comilla city to these three non-CVDP villages are almost identical to those from Comilla city to the three CVDP villages. It was found that there was at least one NGO (either BRAC or Grameen Bank) working in each of the three non-CVDP villages. However, on fervent request from almost all the respondents the author chooses not to mention the names of the CVDP and non-CVDP villages in this paper.

To collect the data a structured close-ended interview-based questionnaire was employed. For the purpose of this study 250 randomly selected households were interviewed in each village cluster. Necessary official records, reports, and publications were also consulted. In addition, intensive discussions were held with the respondents. Data was collected with the help of a group of paid researchers accompanied by the author. The author and the data collectors extensively visited the areas for ensuring viability of the secondary data. Some general information was also gathered from people who were not included in the sample. In addition to the interview based questionnaire, the author also observed the various facets of rural society - poverty and microcredit operations, functional training programs, activities of cooperative societies, etc. - by physically staying with the villagers in their houses as if the author was just another poor villager like many of them who had come to them (the villagers) to know how to get microcredit, functional training, etc., and to improve or enhance his own living standard.

It is pertinent to briefly explain the CVDP of the government to better understand the findings of this present study.

#### *The Comprehensive Village Development Programme (CVDP)*

To eradicate rural poverty and backwardness, the concept of the **Comprehensive Village Development Programme (CVDP)** - a rural development action research program of the government of Bangladesh -