



Marital Conflict and Decisional Role Challenges of Working Women – Evidence from A Study of Marital Decision Making

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I. INTRODUCTION

Women's rising educational attainment and labour-force participation have significantly transformed marital relationships in India, particularly in urban and semi-urban regions such as Tamil Nadu. Working women now contribute substantially to household income while continuing to shoulder primary responsibility for unpaid domestic and caregiving work. This dual burden has direct implications for marital conflict and decision-making roles.

Our broader study on the "Marital Decision Making Process among Unmarried and Married Individuals" demonstrated that employment status is a major determinant of marital dynamics and that men and women participate in marital decision making with similar overall intensity. At the same time, South Indian cultural norms rooted in patriarchy, dowry, and joint family structures continue to privilege male authority and senior in-laws in key decisions, creating ongoing power asymmetries and transactional bargaining within marriage.

This paper narrows the focus to working women within that larger study. It addresses two central questions:

1. How does paid employment affect the nature and intensity of marital conflict for women?
2. What decisional role challenges do working women encounter in negotiating marital choices within the Tamil Nadu context?

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT AND ROLE STRAIN

Work-family conflict theory posits that conflicting demands from work and family roles lead to stress, time pressure, and reduced well-being when participation in one role makes participation in the other more difficult. Indian studies consistently show that married women report higher work-family conflict than men because their paid work is

expected to be flexible around family responsibilities, not the other way around. For working women, such conflict often spills over into marital relationships through fatigue, irritability, and disagreements about priorities and time allocation.

2.2 EQUITY, PERCEIVED INEQUITY, AND MARITAL CONFLICT

Equity theory suggests that perceived imbalance between contributions and rewards in close relationships leads to distress and conflict. In many South Indian households, working women face a "double shift" of paid and unpaid work, which heightens perceptions of being under-benefited and fuels resentment when their contributions are undervalued. Your marital dynamics scale's dimension of perceived inequity directly captures this subjective sense of unfairness, which is closely tied to conflict in dual-earner couples.

2.3 BARGAINING, POWER, AND LOCUS OF CONTROL

Bargaining models view the family as a site of continuous negotiation over resources, responsibilities, and exit options. Spouses' bargaining power depends on income, assets, employability, social support, and realistic alternatives to remaining in the relationship. Your findings show that bargaining is a universal and age-invariant feature of marriage and that employment status significantly heightens overall marital dynamics involvement. Locus of control adds a psychological layer: women with a more internal locus may engage more proactively in negotiation and reform of unfair arrangements, whereas those with an external or fate-oriented locus may tolerate inequity longer or attribute conflict to destiny.

III. METHOD

The data for this paper come from the married and previously married (divorced, separated) subsample in your larger quantitative study of marital decision making among adults



residing in Tamil Nadu. The parent study used self-report questionnaires administered to 519 unmarried and 535 married individuals, focusing here on the employed women within the married/previously married group.

Two scales, developed and validated in the broader research, were used namely the Marital Spectrum Scale for unmarried participants and the Marital Dynamics Scale for married participants. The present paper relies on the Marital Dynamics

Scale, which includes subscales for Marital Conflict, Relational Power, Perceived Inequity, Bargaining Game, and Locus of Control. Statistical analyses in the parent study included descriptive statistics, group comparisons by employment status and demographics, discriminant analysis, and structural equation modelling to examine pathways from conflict, bargaining, and locus of control to marital outcomes.

TABLE.1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF MARITAL DYNAMICS SCALE

Variable	Mean	SD
Relational Power	15.55	3.76
Perceived Inequity	26.67	6.14
Bargaining Game	17.00	6.17
Marital Conflict	34.47	10.15
Locus of Control	49.96	12.30
Overall Marital Dynamics Scale	143.64	32.25

This composite score, representing the sum of all marital dynamics variables, shows a moderate mean with high variability. The large standard deviation (32.25) reflects diverse marital experiences across the sample, ranging from highly functional to highly dysfunctional relationship patterns. These descriptive statistics establish baseline measurements for comparison across demographic subgroups and provide context for understanding how different factors influence marital decision-making patterns.

TABLE 2 MARITAL DYNAMICS BY GENDER AMONG MARRIED INDIVIDUALS

Variable	Gender	n	Mean	SD
Relational Power	Male	279	15.21	3.49
	Female	256	15.91	4.01
Perceived Inequity	Male	279	26.46	4.86
	Female	256	26.89	7.29
Bargaining Game	Male	279	16.96	6.01
	Female	256	17.04	6.35
Marital Conflict	Male	279	35.31	8.35
	Female	256	33.56	11.75
Locus of Control	Male	279	48.83	13.18
	Female	256	51.18	11.17
Overall Marital Dynamics Scale	Male	279	142.78	31.24
	Female	256	144.59	33.35

This table compares men and women on each marital dynamics dimension, indicating broadly similar levels, with men showing slightly higher marital conflict and women slightly higher relational power and locus of control, consistent with a shift toward more egalitarian but still nuanced gender patterns.

TABLE 3 INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES T-TESTS COMPARING MEN AND WOMEN ON MARITAL DYNAMICS

Variable	t	df	p (2-tailed)	Mean difference (M _{male} – M _{female})
Marital conflict	1.997	533	.046	1.75
Relational power	-2.156	533	.032	-0.70
Perceived inequity	-0.819	533	.413	-0.44



Bargaining game	-0.140	533	.889	-0.08
Locus of control	-2.217	533	.027	-2.35
Overall marital dynamics scale	-0.649	533	.517	-1.81

This table reports the significance tests for gender differences, showing that differences in marital conflict, relational power, and locus of control are statistically significant but small in magnitude, while perceived inequity, bargaining, and overall dynamics do not differ significantly between men and women.

Note. Equal variances assumed (Levene's test non-significant or standard "assumed" line reported). Positive mean difference indicates higher scores for men; negative values indicate higher scores for women.

IV. RESULTS: MARITAL CONFLICT AMONG WORKING WOMEN

4.1 EMPLOYMENT AND INTENSITY OF MARITAL DYNAMICS

Our analyses indicate that employment status is a major determinant of marital dynamics: employed individuals, particularly working women, show significantly higher scores on conflict, bargaining, and perceived inequity than non-employed counterparts. This suggests that paid work not only broadens women's decisional involvement but also heightens the level of negotiation and friction around daily and strategic marital decisions.

4.2 DOMAINS AND TRIGGERS OF CONFLICT

In line with sociological work on urban India, conflict among working couples tends to cluster around four domains: division of domestic labour, time and role expectations, financial management, and childrearing and in-law intervention. Our scale results, together with this literature, point to the following pattern:

- Working women experience strain when responsible for most housework and caregiving despite contributing income.
- Disagreements arise over how to prioritize career advancement versus family demands.
- Decisions about savings, large expenditures, and support for natal versus marital families can become contentious when formal financial control remains with husbands or elders.

These tensions feed into higher marital conflict scores and a stronger sense of inequity among working women.

4.3 WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL OUTCOMES

Indian studies on working women's mental health show that high work-family conflict predicts poorer marital adjustment, higher anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Within our framework, women with high conflict and inequity scores are likely those experiencing chronic overload and limited spousal support, which may eventually influence decisions about remaining in or leaving the marriage.

V. RESULTS: DECISIONAL ROLE CHALLENGES

5.1 EXPANDED DECISIONAL ROLES AND HIDDEN ASYMMETRIES

Our broader findings show that men and women now report similar overall intensity of involvement in marital decision making, indicating a move away from overtly male-dominated patterns. For working women, this means active participation in decisions about housing, children's education, fertility timing, and career mobility. However, qualitative and theoretical work suggests that "joint decisions" can mask asymmetries when men retain agenda-setting power or the final say, especially in joint family settings.

5.2 DOUBLE BURDEN AND COGNITIVE LOAD

Working women face a double burden: they not only carry out a large share of domestic work but also coordinate and decide on a wide range of family matters. This cognitive load creates a decisional role challenge—constant planning, monitoring, and problem-solving for both work and home, which can become a source of fatigue and irritability that spills into marital interactions.

5.3 BARGAINING, EXIT OPTIONS, AND RISK OF BACKLASH

Employment enhances women's bargaining position by improving their "exit options" and psychological confidence, encouraging them to press for more equitable division of labour and decision-making authority. Yet evidence from Indian research also indicates that women's employment can, in some cases, provoke backlash, including increased



emotional or physical violence when husbands feel their authority is threatened. This underlines the ambivalent nature of decisional role expansion for working women: gains in voice and autonomy coexist with potential risks.

VI. DISCUSSION

Taken together, our findings and the supporting literature show that working women in Tamil Nadu occupy a complex position within marriage. Employment enhances their involvement in marital decisions and can promote shifts toward more egalitarian or even women-centred power structures, especially among younger, educated couples. At the same time, enduring patriarchal expectations and joint family hierarchies mean that many working women still bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work and must negotiate continuously for fairness and recognition.

The high levels of conflict, perceived inequity, and bargaining observed among employed women are not simply signs of marital breakdown but also reflect active efforts to renegotiate entrenched gender roles. In some marriages, this renegotiation leads to healthier, collaborative decision-making patterns, while in others, it generates chronic disharmony or even violence when male authority is rigidly defended.

VII. IMPLICATIONS

- **Marital counselling:** Practitioners should explicitly address work–family conflict, division of labour, and perceived inequity in sessions with working couples, helping them design fairer role arrangements and shared decision-making practices.
- **Workplace policy:** Employers and the state should recognize that work–family conflict affects both marital stability and productivity; flexible scheduling, childcare support, and non-discrimination policies for married women can indirectly reduce marital strain.
- **Gender-transformative programs:** Community and couple-based interventions in Tamil Nadu need to involve men, challenge norms that naturalize women's double burden, and promote shared responsibility and respect for women's paid work and decisional agency.

VIII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper relies on self-report data from heterosexual married and previously married individuals in Tamil Nadu; results may not generalize to other regions, non-heterosexual relationships, or cohabiting couples. The cross-sectional design precludes tracking how conflict and decisional roles change over time as women's careers and family stages evolve. Future research should employ longitudinal, mixed-method designs, include diverse relationship forms, and more directly measure work–family conflict and organizational conditions to fully map the trajectories of working women's marital decision making.

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