7.1. Summing Up

This chapter draws some vital conclusion of the study by bringing out the main findings from the issues pertaining to women's role in decision-making at the household level.

In the introduction, an attempt was made to discuss the concept of women's role in household decision-making process in the Hmar society. Women's lives are deeply embedded in the household and family. Their position cannot be analysed outside of this primary reference point. Understanding the structure and functions of this social matrix is an important first step in knowing where women are located in society; what the household or family is; how is it constituted and what are the implications for its members when it changes certain issues when household is examined. The household and family have been perennial themes in anthropological studies. They overlap and intermesh in ways that defy analysis. To the economist, the household is primarily a socio- economic unit composed of indifferential members. What is a household then? We can regard it as representing a multitude of roles and tasks encompassed within a relatively selective repertoire of shapes and sizes (Netting *et.al*. 1984). The household and family are both culturally defined. The household may appear as a task oriented unit and the family as a kin-specified group but attitudes, location, function and kinship occur simultaneously and overlap in varying degrees (Krishnaraj 1998: 17-18).

A dichotomous view that uses household and family as mutually exclusive categories- the household being concerned with activities like production, consumption, reproduction directed to the satisfaction of human needs and the family as inhering

symbols, values and meanings-misses the essential connection between the two. 'It is through their commitment to the concept of family that people are recruited to the material relations of the household' (Rapp 1982). The household is not perceived as a unit of interests between members nor it is assumed that the functions of the household are performed jointly by all its members. This is explained by the fact that, productive, reproductive and consumptive activities are potentially in conflict because of the socially differentiated capacities for recruitment of land and labour and for disposal of their product. Furthermore, the conditions of individual members of the household differ with respect to the work to be done (the gender division of labour) as well as to actual or future rights in resources brought by each member or acquired by each member in the assembly of property in land and labour which constitutes a household. These rights in customary or state law determine the disposition of decision-making and the practices of the division of labour in productive and reproductive activities along the lines of gender, generation and socio-political rank which are constituted within the organisational practices of the household (Roberts 1991).

The household as a complex unit can greatly affect household decision-making across an individual's life span. Decision-making describes the process by which households make choices, judgements and ultimately come to conclusions that guide behaviours. Household decision-making implies that more than one member's input and agreement is involved (Scanzoni &Polonko 1980). The process of decision-making in the home, how domestic tasks, responsibilities and resources should be allocated is admittedly a complex sequence of events taking place between spouses and between their kin, affine, colleagues and significant sets of associates and reference groups with and

about whom they exchange goods, services and communications. Household decisions also involve a complex interplay of factors between and among individuals, environments and circumstances.

Besides, from the review of literature it can be deduced that extensive work on gender have been conducted. Mead emphasised on social conditions, while Ortner (1974) symbolically associated women with nature. It is widely understood that resource theory has been greatly emphasised both for division of labour and decision-making power. Household organisational studies particularly of rural households have been of great interests to Anthropologist. These studies emphasised the changing form and function in household organisation, decision-making per se and resource management. Others have tempted to focus from corporate structures to processes of household formation, decision-making and economic activities. Several studies have shown that inspite of huge income shared by women they are not part of the group enjoying the benefits. If earning power, literacy and social and economic background are situated as reasons for women's less participation in decision-making process; keeping in mind the backdrop of the study coupled by the theory "domestic power of women" emphasised by Friedl and Lamphere, this study, therefore, seek to fill in the gap between education and employment, whether or not influences in decision-making at the household level. Why study the household level? It is to be mentioned here that this study is micro in nature and seeks to find clarification for division of labour based on gender construction theory through daily interactions. Thus, drawing upon the theoretical framework of 'domestic power of women', there may arise role conflict when there are negotiated relations. Structurally significant conflict arises in relations of dominance in the unequal distribution of power

and authority says Dahrendorf. Hence, this study endeavoured to look into those aspects of negotiated conflicts that arise as role keep changing.

The present study attempted to locate women's role in decision-making at the household level among the Hmars of Assam. It intended to find out who has the 'final say' in the decision-making processes in the household and whether education and employment has any effect in the process. The specific objectives of the present research are as follows:

1. To study the division of labour based on gender at the household level.
2. To examine the role of education and employment in influencing their role in decision-making at the household level.
3. To analyse the sources of conflict between men and women and the mechanism used for conflict avoidance and resolution at the household level.

Thus, under this framework, the study was conducted following the ethnographic method. I chose to employ this method of field study because it is a style of research rather than a single method and uses a variety of techniques to collect data. This style of research can be defined as the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally (Atkinson *et. al.* 2001; Atkinson & Hammersley 2007; O' Reilly 2005). Ethnography's repertoire of techniques includes in-depth interviews, case study alongside

observation. Visual methods, like video, photography and the internet were also employed.

Hence, in the early winters of 2012, i.e. in the month of February 2012, I embarked for Tuolpui and Muolhoi villages for a preliminary pilot survey and having met the headman, the student's organisation and other prominent figures of the village, I returned after settling even my accommodation. Thus, from May 2012, I started with a household survey, through which a preliminary data on socio-economic background was collected. The data included name, sex, marital status, occupation, educational qualification and income. This facilitated in familiarising with the members of the household and identifying the individuals for in-depth interview that was to follow. Data for my objectives were collected mainly from adult married men and women. The reason behind emphasising married couples is basically that they are the major decision- makers in the household. They are responsible for allocating varied tasks to its members. They are responsible for the functioning of the household and as such, to get the basic answer of women's role in decision-making in the household, I concentrated to this specific population even though the unmarried children do play a big role in various activities in the family. Altogether 20 case studies were also collected to strengthen the study.

The third chapter "**The Hmars**" attempted to describe about the Hmars and their origin. This chapter gives a glimpse of the Hmar settlement in Assam and describes the socio- cultural life of the Hmars in the selected villages.

7.1.1. Gender Division of Labour

The fourth chapter "Gender Division of Labour" attempted to find out if labour is distributed along gender lines in the Hmar household. It has been found that women are burdened in the household activities in both the villages. With regard to cultural activity both men and women participate equally. However, women do not take part in social organisations or the village committee. It is only the head of the household or the father who attends such meetings. One distinguishing feature among the women of both the village is their high rate of involvement in trade and business. From petty commodity production to foreign goods market, women have made a niche for themselves in the market. There is no concept of non- working among Hmar women in both the villages. Community work shows the participation of both the gender. This can be attributed to the *Tlawmngaina* (selfless sacrifice) value that is imbibed in each individual in the society.

From the above discussion, we can say that women are burdened with work. Women perform the majority of 'routine' household chores that are time consuming and less flexible or optional (including cooking, cleaning, shopping, house cleaning and laundry, tasks typically labelled "housework"). Men, on the other hand, often perform tasks that are more flexible which can be performed at one's own discretion (such as household repairs, car maintenance, etc).

Women's involvement in production work does not diminish their role in household work because these are culturally assigned roles in the Hmar society. If division of labour is considered along gender lines then we must conclude along with socialisation and gender role theories which posit that the process of socialization is a major determinant of the gendered division of household labour. Such approaches assume

that differential socialisation of women and men contribute to their different roles in the family and shapes how household labour is divided. According to functionalist socialisation and gender role theories (Parsons & Bales 1956), women are described as occupying the "expressive role" and thus assume responsibility for taking care of family members and performing household chores. Men are complementarily socialised to occupy the "instrumental role," to become providers for their families, and to interface with public institutions. Besides, when we look at the Hmar society, the 'private and public' domain are well structured in the sense that women engage in all the activities in the household while they are segregated from public activities like village committee. Even when women have entered those fields that are regarded as men- centered, especially when it comes to contact with the market economy, it is seen that 'change of work' does not affect the kind of roles women play at the household level. In this sense, there is 'role fluidity' when we refer to income generating activities and responsibilities. In fact, the division of labour is actively negotiated between spouses and even between members in the household on a continual and daily basis (Kluwer *et. al.* 2000; Pittman, Solheim & Blanchard 1996). The gendered behaviour as masculine or feminine is created, maintained and renegotiated in all kinds of 'work' (Zehol 2009).

7.1.2. Decision-Making in the Household

The fifth chapter "Decision-making in the Household" attempted to find out the role of women's education and employment in the decision-making process in the household. The parameters considered are clubbed under the following heads- economic, financial, property and cultural. Under the economic head food preparation, crops to be grown, allocation of tasks and family size are considered. While children's education,

clothing, marriage, household expenditures and investments are categorised under financial category. Land and asset creation formed property and cultural related to any kind of social activities in the village. With regard to economic issues, it has been found that there is limited mutual participation in both the sampled villages. Financial matters are largely taken care by the men in both the villages. Women have no control or right over the property. They may share their opinion or pool their resources whenever they are in a position to create or purchase. With regard to village committee, men are seen to participate in higher percentage, while in the cultural programmes or community activities, there is no gender bias.

As have been rightly compared 'women's domain to the kitchen', women took major decisions when it comes to the kitchen. They could share commodities like rice, vegetables from the garden and so on. However, commodities or produce or livestock that are of higher value could not be shared or sold without the consent of the husband. The notion of *thil pawimaw le ṭul* which means, 'matters of importance and need' or the term *thil lien le thil chin* which means 'big and small' is self-explanatory in the sense that associated with 'small' are the women and associated with 'big' or 'importance' are the men. This concept finds applicable even in asset creation. With market that is some 35 kms away, it was found that in Tuolpui, savings in the bank or purchases from the market are mainly the responsibility of the men. For it was them, the men who remained outside the house most of the time. However, one important phenomenal practice that sparked off is that there are a number of women who engage in distribution of jhum products from the village to the nearby town or market. In Tuolpui village, we find that there are women who engage as broker; collect the jhum products from the village and transport them to

Mahur or to Haflong towns. Even in Muolhoi village, a number of women folk engage in vegetable vending, meaning, they travel to Mahur (local products are in abundance) or collect the vegetables brought by other women folk from nearby villages in bulk and sell them in the market.

Women in the Hmar society do have the privilege to decide on certain matter in the household. Like E. Friedl and L. Lamphere emphasised the 'domestic power of women', so too in the Hmar society, domestic power is manifested in the individually negotiated relations based in the domestic sphere. While acknowledging the domestic power of women, we cannot overlook the fact in the Hmar society that 'authority' rests with men. Women do participate in the process of decision-making; however, they are not equipped with the right to decide on their own. As mentioned in the first objective, women's participation in economic undertakings deserves an applaud and has greatly contributed to the welfare of the household. However, when it comes to authority over the trading of those products, women alone have no right to decide.

Nevertheless, the relative power position of the husband or the wife has been shown to be influenced by the comparative resources that they bring to marriage, such as education and employment. Hence, respective bargaining power of different members of the household depends as well on their position outside the household. Women in Muolhoi enjoy a relatively high socio- economic status and are more exposed to education. Hence, what has been observed and found is that women participate more in the decision-making process. In Tuolpui village, women's participation is meagre in decision-making processes. Women in both the sampled villages share their opinion and thoughts, however, the 'final say' or the 'final word' belongs to the head of the household

which is the husband. They may not be the 'muted' group as anthropologists have proposed; nevertheless, they are neither the sole decision- maker.

Rural women engaged in jhum cultivation do not appear to have an increase in decision-making. Urban wives, however, show an increase in power when gainfully employed outside the house. While the results are not spectacular, it is still possible to conclude that gainful employment for the wife outside the household does increase her resources and thus her power. Increased education of women also shows an increased participation in decision-making process.

There is clear demarcation of the public and private spaces in both the villages as their participation in social sphere is limited to participating in cultural activities. Since, women do not take part in local committee, their influence over decision-making is also negligible. However, when we talk about women association at a higher level of districts and the region, without doubt the women of Muolhoi lead as in the Hmar language it is said, '*a thiem le var*' which means 'the educated and the wise'. Thus, clearly education and employment do influence the decision-making process. However, being under the fold of the patriarchal norms and values, they play a subordinate role with no authority to 'final say'. When we look at the Hmar patriarchal society, a woman has no rights within the family and society. In fact, she belonged in body and mind, from her birth till her death, to her father and brother and to her husband after her marriage. The woman possessed nothing even though she did most of the work within and outside the house.

7.1.3. Conflict and Accommodation

The chapter, "Conflict of Interests" attempted to analyse the sources of conflict between men and women and the mechanism used for conflict avoidance and resolution at the household level. Contemporary Hmar society is in transition. Tradition is undergoing continuous change. However, the modern has not been fully accepted. In such circumstances, there is a great deal of confusion in social and cultural norms. From the case studies, it has been found that there are there are a number of causes of conflict in the household. Some of these conflicts are related to:

   a. To household responsibility

   b. Issue relating with behaving with relatives and parents- in- law

   c. Control over income and expenditure

   d. General character of the partner

   e. Conduct of the partner in marital relation and

   f. Controlling and taking care of children.

Thus, there are many causes of conflict. However, the most pertinent issue is in relation to household responsibility and issue relating with behaving with relatives and parents- in- law. If we correlate to the first objective of the study, women are overburdened with work and hence this manifests in the household conflicts. Besides, expectation from the parents- in- law too create tension and serve as one significant cause of conflict. It is found that these are negotiated in the household. Besides, there are multiple causes of conflicts and people uses the culturally available mechanism for conflict resolution. These include *Zu-Dam, Inremna Ruoi and Se Sun*. Besides the

traditional peace building mechanisms, it is found that among the Hmars conflict is avoided and resolved by one of the partner submitting to the other which in the Hmar language can be termed as '*inphahnuoi'*. This term signifies that the person is submissive. It is to be noted here that this virtue is expected from a woman particularly a Hmar wife. *Inbiekrem* or negotiation is the other conflict resolution mechanism employed by the Hmars from the sampled villages. *Inbiekremna* is initiated by close members, relatives and friends or during worst situations, the clansmen involve settling the dispute. Many of the informants resorted to prayer as have been reported by many of the informants when faced with conflicting situation at home.

7.2. Sexual Asymmetry: From Domestic to Public

There is one phenomena that is common to both the villages, i.e. women entering those arena that are "unladylike". In the sense that women are now active in those activities that were at one point of time considered to be under man's jurisdiction. For instance, women are now part of the market economy because of trade. They are in constant contact with the urban. If work is viewed as an index of the status of women and the shift of women's workforce entering those domains that are multifarious, then can we consider the status of Hmar women to be relatively high? Whyte (1978) notes that some prior theorists have seen work contribution as one of the crucial rights and powers that women must have if they are to have relatively high standing. Work is considered an important determinant of female status. Work can also be seen as exploitation; thus, the context of work is important in assessing the prestige it does or does not confer (Nash 1984: 108). Hence, it has been found out that Hmar women take pride in the kind of work they do. They accept the fact they are overloaded and burdened, but is not comparable to

the effort they give for the welfare of their household. The maximisation of household welfare holds top priority and as such, women are willing to undertake any kind of work, demeaning or prestigious.

What is most striking and surprising is the fact that male, as opposed to female, activities are always recognised as predominantly important and cultural systems give authority and value to the roles and activities of men. This asymmetry in the cultural evaluations of male and female, in the importance assigned to women and men, appears to be universal. Some area of activity is always seen as exclusively or predominantly male, and therefore overwhelmingly and morally important. This observation has its corollary in the fact that everywhere men have some authority over women, that they have a culturally legitimated right to her subordination and compliance. At the same time, of course, women themselves are far from helpless, and whether or not their influence is acknowledged, they exert important pressures on the social life of the group. In other words, in various circumstances male authority might be mitigated and perhaps rendered almost trivial, by the fact that women may have a good deal of informal influence and power. While acknowledging male authority, women may direct it to their own influences whom and how, the power exercised by women may have considerable and systematic effect (Rosaldo 1974:19-21).

A final reflex of the opposition between domestic and public spheres of activity is particularly difficult to generalise because in the sampled villages female economic activities are truly varied. Yet the economic organisation of women does seem to be relatively less public than that of men; women tend to work individually or in loosely organised groups. And the products of female labour tend to be directed to the family and

the home. Even when the products of women's labour are distributed in the larger community, it is often in support of male prestige. This leads to restate Engels's suggestive claim that women were once involved in "social production" and with the development of technology and capital, have been relegated to the domestic sphere. Rather, it seems that a domestic/ public asymmetry is general in economic forms of human organisation as in other forms (Ibid).

7.3. Perception of an 'Ideal Woman'

Participants of any culture make choices and take decisions. Whenever a choice is made or a decision is taken, there is a thought process at work. This cognitive process may be described as an interpretation of the cultural ideology under abstraction of the actual situation (Brouwer 2005). The cultural ideology of what compelled the women in the sampled villages to do the kind of labour and or be involved in the kind of decision-making process can be understood from the prevailing ideal woman perception. This construct that is inherent in the minds of every woman is interpreted in the actions and behaviours and decisions that a woman make in the day to day activities.

In the previous chapters, the women in the sampled villages were bounded by 'duty' and 'responsibility' of the home which were believed to be their rightful work. They could not escape from these works inspite of their engagement in income-generating activities. A woman had to maintain a quiet demeanour and listen when her husband was doing the talk or during conflictual situation, the woman was supposed to refrain from answering back lest she angers her husband all the more. A woman was expected to be everything else. She was supposed to keep her accepted wisdom only for

the right moment, else she may prompt her husband to antagonism. A Hmar woman was above all expected to be under her husband. Because this is the accepted 'ideal woman' in the sampled Hmar society. This patriarchal ideology has already been ingrained in the minds of all little ones right from the socialisation process. Hence, interpreting the 'accepted ideology' to be the 'ideal woman' is manifested in the actions and behaviours of the women. Women cannot articulate their own value as individuals within the framework of the male- dominated socially valued perceptions (Zehol 2015).

7.4. Patrilineal or Patriarchal

A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privileges by being *male dominated, male identified and male centered*. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women (Johnson 2005). The cultural idea that structures the web of social relationships, which underlies privilege, is also patriarchal. Like Zehol (2015) have stated men make all the decisions and all of the dominant social values are defined by masculine characteristics. These are what define Hmar patriarchy.

The Hmars trace their descent through the male line and this patrilineal system transcends into what we call patriarchy, meaning from patrilineal to a society where men are superior to women, where men hold the power and women are largely excluded. In this system, the society put cultural emphasis upon male traditions, the continuity of male knowledge and upon male relatives. From such a male point of view, women are viewed as less permanent members of society and are less socially relevant than men. Inspite of enjoying use rights to land, women do not own the property (Ibid). Women do enjoy

certain domestic power which however, does not challenge the socially dominant representations of men. The answer can be sought only at the level of 'practice' says Zehol. To put it, "female perspective does not constitute an alternative model. Instead it is an attempt by women to identify and value themselves as women within the cultural constructs they encounter. The male model is not a static and definitive structure but an ideology that is inconsistent, incomplete and nowhere near as systematic as its self-presentation would suggest. If a female perspective is an attempt at location, rather a worldview within the male-focused, than a subversion of that worldview, the male order can continue to bind the female alternative through a recursive process of negotiation and re-negotiation rather than simple domination. This re-negotiation is an asymmetrical process through which the socially dominant becomes socially acceptable" (Zehol 2015: 183-184).

This patriarchal ideology manifests itself in daily life situations, where women find themselves torn in between the so-called modern attitudes, their self- interests and beliefs and the stronghold of patriarchal orientation. Women have to imbibe and re-learn the socially desirable 'and perceived naturalness of the dominant social values'. They are at the behest of men's superior mindset and attitude and while this patriarchal ideology continues, women exert 'benevolent subordination' (Ao 2010). Thus, this has been found to be one important factor, which has limited women from the sampled villages to take control of their daily lives.

7.5. Concluding Thought

I have so far deliberated on the issue of women's decision-making at the household level and have come to the conclusion that patriarchal ideology and patrilineality, coupled by the strong belief in the customs and traditions, the inheritance pattern and upholding patriarchal identity have given limited space to women inspite of the growth in education and employment.