

Changes of Decision-making Power in the Matriarchal Family: A Case Study of the Raglai People in Khanh Hoa Province

Truong Van Cuong

MA., Institute of Ethnology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Email: truongcuong1983@gmail.com

Received 11 June 2018; published 25 November 2018

Abstract: *Using a case study of Raglai ethnic families in Khanh Son, Khanh Vinh districts and Cam Ranh City (Khanh Hoa province), the paper initially explores the decision-making power of men and women in matriarchal families under the influences of the reform and integration process. The survey results show that the status, role and power of the wife and the husband in the family have changed considerably towards a positive trend. The household decision-making now is shared between spouses on the basis of discussion and mutual agreement, which promotes progress towards gender equality in a modern society.*

Keywords: Decision-making Authority, Matriarchal Families, Raglai Ethnic Group, Khanh Hoa Province

1. Introduction

Decision-making power came into existence along with the formation and development of human society under various forms. Currently in Vietnam, the power to make decisions in the family is viewed through the characteristics of profession, income, education level, and place of residence. These are regarded as the four principal factors influencing the household decision-making power. Some multi-dimensional studies have been conducted on the issue of family rights. Tran Thi Thanh Loan (2016: 54-

67) claimed that women working in non-agricultural economic activities are more likely to be decision makers on family expenditure than women only engaged in agriculture. Similarly, women whose income is at the same level with that of their husbands tend to have more power to make household spending decisions than women whose income is lower than that of their husbands. Also, women in urban areas have more say in decisions on family spending than their rural counterparts. According to Vu Thi Cuc (2007: 41-52), education level is a significant predictor

of the decision-making power in the family. Dang Thanh Nhan (2015: 48-56) pointed out that the power to make decisions on child education and rearing is determined by education and income level of the spouses. However, influenced by Confucianism, Vietnamese authors tend to hold a view of women as less powerful than their husbands in the patriarchal family. What about the decision-making power in matriarchal communities in which power rests with matriarchs (old women)? Has it changed under the current integration context? From the perspectives of the interaction between gender and the modernization process, this article attempts to shed a light on the issues related to decision-making power in the matriarchal family through a case study of the Raglai ethnic group in Khanh Hoa province in the following aspects: decisions regarding childbearing (number of children), children's education and marriage, daily family earnings and spending, household production and business activities, and so forth^(*).

2. Characteristics of the studied ethnic group

Raglai (also called Raclay, Rai, Noang, La Vang, Orang Glai) is one of the five ethnic groups in the Malayo-Polynesian

language family. The Raglai people have a long history of living in the mountainous areas of the provinces in the southern central coast of Viet Nam. According to the Housing and Population Census 2009, the Raglai population was 112,245 people (59,916 male and 62,329 female), concentrated in the provinces of Ninh Thuan (58,911 people) and Khanh Hoa (45,915 people). In Khanh Hoa province, they live in numerous communes in the districts of Khanh Son, Khanh Vinh and the city of Cam Ranh which are also the survey areas of this study. The attributes of heads of households surveyed are as follows. The average age was 43.8 years old, with the youngest being 21 and oldest being 94. As for the educational level, 30.8% remained illiterate, 36.7% finished primary school, 19.8% completed lower secondary school, 10.8% finished upper secondary school, 1.8% obtained professional secondary education and higher education. Regarding employment, 84% of the people were working in agricultural sector, 9% were government employees, 2.7% waged workers, 2.7% engaged in business and services, and 2.2% working incapable. As for gender, 74.7% were male and 25.3% were female. The Raglai society is traditionally matriarchal, characterized with extended families. Each family is comprised of some married couples with their children living together in a stilt house. Each member family is an independent economic unit (Vu Dinh Muoi, 2015:40). Managing all domestic affairs, from production and distribution of products, clothes, to settlement of internal quarrels, social interaction, religion... is responsible

^(*) The article utilizes the survey data of the 2015-2016 research project "Marriage and family of the Raglai people in Khanh Hoa province", led by Assoc. Prof. Nguyen Ngoc Thanh. The sample consisted of 600 households in 6 communes (100 households in each commune): Son Binh, Son Hiep (Khanh Son district), Khanh Trung, Khanh Nam (Khanh Vinh district), Cam Phuoc Dong, Cam Thinh Tay (Cam Ranh city). In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 households.

for by an old woman (head of household) of good knowledge and high respect. However, the ongoing modernization and social transformation has led to a gradual change in the status of husbands and men in matriarchal families. At present, only 28.7% of the respondents stated that old women were the most powerful in clans.

3. Family decision making

The survey results are as follows (Figure 1):

- Childbearing (number of children)

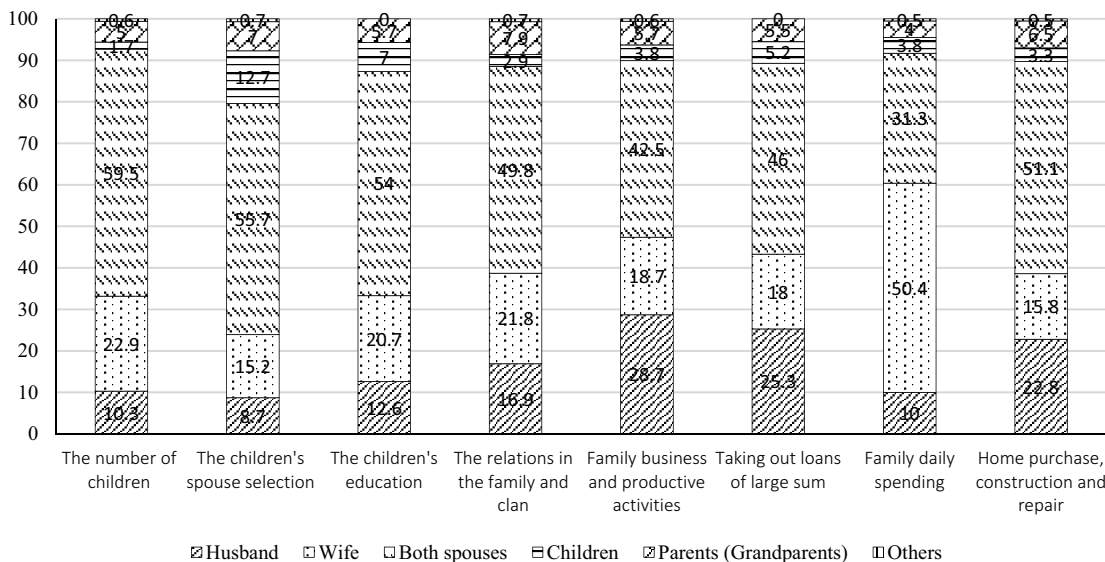
In the traditional Raglai matriarchal society, the issue of successors of a family is regarded as insignificant. In the past years, however, the modernization process and family planning policy of the government have caused a change in the view of Raglai married couples on the number of children in the family. “Formerly, Raglai couples used to have many children, at least five or six, and maybe more than ten. At present, each family normally has only

two or three children” (Mau Hong Thai, born 1947, Raglai ethnic group, Son Hiep, Khanh Son). The data in Figure 1 shows that, in 59.6% of cases surveyed, there was discussion and spousal agreement on childbearing preferences (the number of children). The husband makes decision in 10.3% of cases. In only 22.9% of cases, the wife is the decision makers. Moreover, other members in the family (parents, children) also have some degree of influence on the spouses’ childbearing preferences, albeit in modest 7.3% of cases, of which parents account for 5%, other children account for 1.7% and the surrounding people (neighbors, hamlet and communal women association) make up 0.6%.

- Children’s marriage

The Raglai matriarchal customs do not allow marriage between people who belong to the same clan or the same branch of one clan, or relatives in the maternal

Figure 1. The decision-maker(s) in Raglai families for selected issues



Source: Calculated from the sociological survey data on ethnic groups in Khanh Hoa province

lineage, however distant they might be. A young couple is free to date but they need the consent of both families. Parents of the couple are those who have the final say. In 55.7% of the cases surveyed, the parents of the couple would discuss and come to final decision after the couple dating for some time. However, when no consensus between the father and the mother is found, the mother would make the call in 15.2% of cases, compared to 8.7% of cases in which the decision is taken by the father. The couple takes decision in 12.7% of cases while the decision-makers in 7% cases are grandparents of the couple and in 0.7% are the others (village elders, relatives, friends, etc.). In the past, all children took the mother's last name. At present, in only 65.3% of cases surveyed children take the mother's last name. The father's last name is taken in 22.5% of cases. In the remaining 12.2% of cases, both last names of the father and the mother are given to their children.

- *Children's education*

Traditionally, the Raglai people attach great importance to the role of the family in educating children. From an early age, children are taught by parents and grandparents about ethics, from proper verbal interaction to appropriate behaviour in the family. Most of the Raglai children in the study area are put through lower secondary school by their parents. Whether the children further their study to higher levels needs to be discussed and decided by the parents. The reason is that children's educational pursuit at upper secondary schools and colleges creates additional financial burden on their parents and also equates to losing manpower for household

economic activities. As revealed by the survey results, the decisions on children's education are dependent on the discussion and agreement of both parents in 54% of cases. The mother makes the call in 20.7% of cases and the father is the decision-makers in 12.6% cases. Moreover, the wish of the children is the deciding factor in 7% of cases and 5.7% cases are influenced by the grandparents.

- *Production and business activities*

Formerly, the traditional livelihood of the Raglai people was cultivation, animal husbandry, and natural resource extraction. Although some new livelihoods (waged employment, running business, commercial agricultural production, etc.) have emerged, agriculture remains the major livelihood for the Raglai people. The division of labor and organization of production activities are subject to the discussion and agreement of both the wife and the husband in 42.5% of cases. The husband takes the decision in 28.7% of cases and the decision is up to the wife in 18.7% cases. Sometimes (in 10.1% cases) their parents or children make the decision. It can be said that when it comes to business, the role of the husband is greater than that of the wife. The possible reason is that the new livelihoods demand strength, proactivity, and acumen in social relations which are the advantages of the husband rather than the wife. A married man said: "Our family has 50 durian trees. My wife and I discuss on matters related to seedlings, fertilizers, or taking out loans for investment but I often make decision, because I know more about these matters than my wife who mostly stays at home. Additionally, my wife always agrees with

my decisions in these matters” (Cao Xuan Ha, born 1977, Raglai ethnic group, Son Binh commune, Khanh Son district).

In this day and age, the participation of Raglai people in the market economy has widened with the initial engagement in commercial production, doing business, and service provision. The cultivation of industrial crops, fruit trees such as coffee, durian, acacia, manglietia conifera, or black pepper... requires a large amount of investment while the financial capacity of each family is limited. Therefore, some families have to raise funding from their relatives, but many others borrow money from banks at low interest rates through farmer associations or women association and so forth. 48.5% of the families surveyed indicated that they were in debt to banks. The money borrowed were used for reasonable purposes: 76.8% of respondents used the borrowings for productive and business purposes; 8% used theirs for home construction and repair; 3.1% for daily expenditure; 1.4% for health care services; 1% for purchasing home appliances like television, refrigerator, and/or motorbike; 0.3% for funerals or weddings. The remaining 7.3% utilized the borrowed money for other purposes (well drilling, water tank construction, etc.). The decision to take out a loan is based on the consensus of the spouses in 46% of cases, is up to the husband in 25.3% cases, is made by the wife in 18% cases and influenced by their parents and children in 10.7% cases.

- Family expenditure and revenue

Formerly, the Raglai people maintained economic self-reliance through cultivation, animal husbandry, and

natural resource extraction. Currently, as the market economy has developed, it is easier to sell agricultural products and buy commodities for domestic consumption. Decisions on family expenditure are made principally by the wife in 50.4% of cases surveyed, based on the spousal agreement in 31.3% cases, and taken by the husband in the 10% cases. In addition, the parents and children of the married couples have influence on those decisions in 8.3% cases. It can be said that the man now not only plays a more visible role in making decisions on the important issues of the family, but also has greater say in matters related to daily family expenditure. Some female respondents shared the view that the wife normally takes decisions on daily expenses such as buying foods, clothes, or low-cost items, etc. Discussion with the husband takes place when it comes to purchasing high-value items such as television, motorbike, wardrobe, rice cookers, and so forth.

- House buying, construction and repair

Formerly in the Raglai communities, about five to ten households which were closely related in the maternal lineage tended to live together in a stilt house. Each household was comprised of parents and unmarried children (Phan Xuan Bien, 1998: 107). With the ongoing trend towards nuclear family system, activities related to house purchase, construction or repair take place very frequently. They are important matters that involve a large amount of money. Therefore, the consensus of the married couple is required in 51.1% of the cases surveyed. The decisions rest with the husband in 22.8% and with the wife in only 15.8% cases.

The influence from parents and children of the couple is significant in 10.3% cases. A male respondent said: "I am working as a teacher in a primary school and my wife is a farmer. We have two children. I am the principal decision-maker in the family on, for instance, house construction in the past and borrowing money from the bank to plant 3 hectares of acacia last year. Only then did I tell my wife about my decisions and she agreed without any objection" (Cao Van Nhu, born 1983, Khanh Trung commune, Khanh Vinh district).

- Family and relative relationship

The Raglai people traditionally pay attention to establishing concordant relationship among the family members across generations. As for the relations with the clan and community, the head of household is responsible for preserving, fostering, and harmonizing those relationships. The head of household represents the family in social meetings and assisting other families in the clan or village in times of need. To date, the decisions related to the internal and external relations of the family require the discussion and agreement of the married couple in the 49.8% of families surveyed. Apart from that, the wife assumes the power to make decisions in 21.8% of cases while the husband takes decisions in only 16.9%. Parents and children also exert significant influence on those decisions in 11.5% cases.

In light of the above, it can be said that the balance of power in household decision-making in the Raglai community in the study area has changed considerably. The number of cases involving the spousal discussion and mutual agreement accounts for a fairly high percentage of the cases

surveyed, such as in the decisions on the number of children (59.5%), on children's spouse selection (55.7%), on children's education (54%), or productive activities and business (42.5%). The decisions on daily family expenditure, once thought to be the sole female responsibility, now are shared with the man in 31.3% of cases. A noteworthy positive trend is that, in some important issues where the advantages of men such as physical power or social skills can be exploited, their voice is increasingly respected, as in production and business decisions (28.7% of husbands are decision-makers compared to 18.7% of wives), bank loan (25.3% of against 18% of wives), and house purchase, construction, and repair (22.8% of husbands compared to 15.8% of wives). Under the influence of long-standing matriarchy system, in some issues the wife still has more power as the sole decision-maker than the husband. The predominance of the wife is particularly visible in decisions related to daily family expenditure (50.4% of wives against 10% of husbands), the number of children (22.9% of wives compared to 10.3% of husbands), children's marriage (15.2% of wives compared to 8.7% of husbands), and children's education (20.7% of wives compared to 12.6% of husbands).

4. Affecting factors and trend

Like other ethnic minorities nationwide, the policies by the Party and the State, the market economy, and the integration process have led to profound changes in the socio-economic picture of the Raglai people. After the national reunification (in 1975), especially after Doi Moi (initiated in 1986), the people gradually picked up

the pieces and advanced their lives by their own efforts as well as with the state assistance through preferential socio-economic programs and policies. Roads and schools have been built, covering the Raglai villages and hamlets. With the funding support, district and provincial boarding and semi-boarding schools have also been constructed. Thanks to the investment into education, the awareness of the people, especially young generations, on gender and division of labor has substantially improved.

Another factor that should not be overlooked is the transition from the system of matriarchal multiple-family households to the matriarchal nuclear family system. According to the survey data, the number of two-generation families with up to 4 members accounted for 66% of the households surveyed; the households with 5 to less than 10 members made up 33.5%; the households with 10 members and 13 members accounted for 0.33% and 0.16%, respectively. As much as 74.7% of the families surveyed registered the male heads of household. The female heads of household were recorded in the remaining 25.3% families. It is the splitting of large households into small families that contributes to curtailing the power of the matriarchs.

The influence of the media (radio, television, newspaper, and the Internet) and the cultural exposure and exchange between the Raglai and Kinh people are also a significant reason for the positive changes in labor division and decision-making pattern related to the role of spouses in the family. The interface between the Raglai matriarchal system and

the Kinh patriarchy has helped shape the relative equality in the husband and wife relationship within the Raglai community. In light of the above, it can be said that higher educational level, expanded employment opportunities, and the shift to nuclear family structure are the factors leading to changing the locus of decision-making power in Raglai families. In this changing picture, the trend towards gender equality has been growing in visibility. While in the past the power to make decisions rested with matriarchs, the voice of men now is given increasing weight in decision-making.

5. Conclusion

In the past, the Raglai women were heads of household and took charge of all affairs in the family, whether they were important or minor issues. As revealed from the survey, under the influence of the exchange and integration process, the position, role and power of members in the family, especially the wife and husband have changed considerably in some aspects. The trend is positive in the sense that it involves more spousal discussion and sharing, towards the gender equality of the modern society. One of the spouses taking decisions on his/her own for the family is no longer commonplace. The Raglai women have lost their absolute superiority enjoyed in the past. This “redistribution of power” is reasonable and reflective of an inevitable tendency in the modern society. The sharing of power paves the way for gender equality, restricting undemocratic and subjective decision-making. It also lays the foundation for close-knit and happy families which are the cells of society □

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