



AUGUST 2021

Measuring Women's Goal Setting and Decision-Making

Improving women's agency is crucial for advancing gender equality. Less than half of women in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia participate in making decisions over their own health care, major household purchases and visiting their families.¹ Improving women's intra-household bargaining power has also been shown to benefit economic development: women making decisions is linked to greater investments in female goods and wellbeing, as well as nutrition and human capital for children (Duflo 2003; Ashraf, Karlan, and Yin 2010; Hou and Ma 2011; Doss 2013; Armand et al. 2020). In addition to strengthening women's decision-making power, another priority for gender equality is ensuring that women can enact well-defined goals that stem from their own values and preferences. Existing evidence shows that women face constraints in setting concrete goals and strategies for achieving them (e.g., Johnson 2015), and their motivation is less likely to stem from intrinsic goals compared to men (e.g., Vaz, Pratley, and Alkire 2016).

Improving women's ability to define goals and act on them is an important—and urgent—policy goal. Yet our understanding of how to achieve this goal is hampered by the lack of adequate measurement tools and recognized best practices. First, existing measures of women's agency tend to have a narrow focus: standard survey questions do not capture the nuances of intra-household relationships or the constraints women face in defining and realizing their preferences—or how they relate to existing norms. Without knowing the different sources of and motivation for preferences, we are failing to measure agency in a way that is grounded in women's values. And, even when measures capturing these broader dimensions of women's goal setting and decision-making do exist, they are often not

Measures for Advancing Gender Equality (MAGNET)

The Measures for Advancing Gender Equality (MAGNET) initiative aims to broaden and deepen the measurement of women's agency, based on the development of new tools and rigorous testing and comparison of both new and existing methods for measuring agency, and promoting the adoption of these measures at scale. By increasing the availability of innovative meaningful measures of agency for a broad range of contexts, we hope our work will lead to an improved understanding of what women's agency is, how it manifests and how it can best be measured across contexts given the research question at hand.

MAGNET is a collaboration between the World Bank's Africa Gender Innovation Lab and Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) teams, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and researchers at Oxford University. We plan to develop a range of new survey tools, each tested across multiple contexts. MAGNET focuses on three dimensions of women's agency that have high potential for catalyzing progress on women's economic empowerment, but for which the body of existing measurement methods is weak or under-tested: (i) ownership and control of assets, (ii) goal-setting and decision-making, and (iii) sense of control and efficacy.

¹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.DMK.ALLD.FN.ZS>



validated in lower-income country contexts or adapted to the realities of women's lives in these settings. This results in a fragmented understanding of women's agency, restricting the design of quality interventions and the evaluation of their impact.

Research is needed to broaden and deepen the measurement of women's goal setting and decision-making, both within and outside the household. This brief summarizes existing knowledge gaps in these two measurement areas and lays out how the Measures for Advancing Gender Equality (MAGNET) initiative plans to tackle them.

KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Understanding women's control over decision-making

Women's decision-making power is most commonly measured by asking household members who usually makes decisions over a standard set of domains (e.g., large assets purchased, children's education, health). However, interpreting being a decision maker as a proxy of empowerment is only valid if the respondent desires to be involved in the decision. It is not hard to imagine situations in which *not* being a decision maker reflects an individual acting on their own desires. In addition, recent work shows how small tweaks in decision-making questions ([Peterman et al. 2021](#)) can substantially change our assessment of a women's empowerment—as does accounting for individuals' valuations over choices ([Maiorano et al. 2021](#)). More research is needed to understand in which instances individuals want to make decisions, when women prefer to make decisions alone instead of jointly with their partner or other household members, and what we can conclude about women's agency when we observe them making certain choices. For instance, when do women make decisions because their husbands are unavailable or simply unwilling to participate in burdensome decisions? When does women expressing a lack of interest in certain decisions reflect their preferences instead of internalized social norms? Does the number of daily decisions a woman makes result in bandwidth depletion and influence her desire to be less involved in other decisions?

Evidence also suggests that wives and husbands have systematically different perceptions of who makes these decisions and that the process of decision-making

itself—over and above the final outcome—has important implications for households ([Seymour and Peterman 2018](#); [Annan et al. 2020](#); [Ambler et al. 2021](#)). Understanding intra-household disagreements over decision-making requires first analyzing whether the process of decision-making is different for men and women, and why. Evidence shows that across many country studies, women report joint decision-making more often than men ([Acosta et al. 2020](#); [Ambler et al. 2021](#)) but we know little about the reasons behind this, and how these dynamics may vary across domains and contexts ([Kishor and Subaiya 2008](#); [Seymour and Peterman 2018](#); [Jarvis et al. 2020](#)). Do women and men have a different conceptualization of what a decision maker is or what joint decision-making entails? Do they answer differently due to diverging beliefs on communal social norms or social desirability bias? What role does the local and cultural context play in gendered interpretations of the decision-making process? And how do individual conflict strategies shape the intra-household decision-making process and decision outcomes ([Rahim 2010](#))? Moreover, research has shown that whether—and how—spouses disagree on intra-household decision-making arrangements matters for women's and children's outcomes ([Annan et al. 2020](#); [Ambler et al. 2021](#); [Bussolo, Sarma, and Williams 2021](#)). But the evidence base is thin and somewhat mixed on how these patterns vary across contexts ([Allendorf 2007](#); [Story and Burgard 2012](#); [Shakya et al. 2018](#)).

Another knowledge gap is how best to capture whether women feel their opinions are valued—even when they are not reported as main decision makers—and what specific efforts they may undertake, both tacit and explicit, to increase their power to shift decisions towards their preferred view. For example, [Afzal et al. \(2018\)](#) show that women are more likely to demand increased agency than men (measured as the willingness to pay for executive decision-making power over consumption decisions), but embedding such an experimental measure in household surveys can be tricky. Moreover, women's efforts to change or push back on decisions will also depend on the resistance and backlash that women would face if they tried ([Angelucci and Heath 2020](#); [Deschênes, Dumas, and Lambert 2020](#)). It is crucial to explore the prevalent ways other individuals use to restrain women's power, including coercion (silencing, cutting access to information, violence) and discrediting (defamation, misrepresentation). More work is needed to understand when, by whom, and the type of backlash (economic,

physical, emotional) women face when they engage in decision-making. In addition, there has been a strong focus on discrepancies within the couple, but discrepancies with other family members may also be worth exploring in certain settings ([Gram et al 2018](#); [Akter and Francis-Tan 2020](#); [Khanna and Pandey 2021](#); [Gupta, Ksoll, and Maertens 2021](#)).

Understanding women's goals and goals-setting capacity

An individual's ability to define goals that are in line with her values is a crucial component of agency. Without knowing what an individual's own goals and preferences are, it is difficult to understand and measure agency, as observed choices may be consistent with multiple sets of expectations and preferences ([Manski 2004](#); [Donald et al. 2020](#)).

Most previous work exploring whether individuals' actions are guided by their own values (motivational autonomy) derives from the Self-Determination Theory developed by psychology scholars. The theory classifies human actions as driven by internal (autonomous), external (coerced), and introjected (internalized social pressures and norms) motivations ([Ryan and Deci 2000](#); [Vaz, Pratley, and Alkire 2016](#)). Existing survey tools, such as the Relative Autonomy Index, perform well regarding the distinction between external coercion and independent motivation. However, they do not perform as well in capturing to what extent goals are based on internalized social norms. More research is needed on the best way to capture the formation of women's preferences and whether they are driven by internalized norms: is it through tweaking existing motivational autonomy questions, or are tools to measure automatic cognition developed within psychology and other cognitive sciences more reliable?

It also remains unexplored to what extent standardized goal-setting questionnaires used in psychology studies, which have been validated and shown to be strongly related to well-being outcomes ([Donald et al. 2020](#)), can be streamlined and adapted to measure goal-setting capacity in development settings. Existing tools are industry-specific and meant for use in formal employment settings ([Locke and Latham 1979](#); [Lee et al. 1991](#)): there is a need for tools that are more broadly applicable across domains and countries. An important aspect is also the consistency of types of tools that measure constructs that should be stable over time, since answers may be subject

to seasonal bias induced by changes in the respondent's cognitive bandwidth, which may be relevant for women in low-income settings. For instance, recent work in development has documented strong impacts of poverty on cognitive abilities ([Mani 2013](#); [World Bank 2015](#); [Li, Yang, and Luo 2021](#)).

MAGNET WORKPLAN

MAGNET will develop new measurement tools to answer these questions, including a new goal-setting capacity questionnaire, novel tools to measure agency (automatic cognition test and text analysis), a new measure of motivational autonomy, and new decision-making questions that more closely reflect the reality of women's lives: unpacking how they make decisions, influence them, renegotiate them and value them.

Decision-making questions:

MAGNET will generate a range of new decision-making survey questions, suitable for inclusion in large-scale household surveys. These will include:

- A survey module to explore whether women are consulted within their existing intra-household decision-making arrangements, whether they feel their opinion is valued—especially in cases where they do not describe themselves as the main decision maker—and how they decide which decisions are important to them (e.g., monetary value, gendered preferences).
- Decision-making questions to capture the 'resist' and 'backlash' dimensions of women's agency, allowing researchers and practitioners to answer questions such as: what type of retaliation do women face when participating in decision making? Does backlash depend on preferences alignment with other decision makers? What type of resistance women expect to face if they engaged in decision making? Who do women fear resistance from?
- A module—focused on water use and allocation—to measure interpersonal conflict strategies (e.g., avoidance, dominance, compromise), shedding light on the dynamics that emerge in the context of intra-household disagreement.
- Decision-making questions to capture how different household arrangements (e.g., whether women do all of half or half of all decisions) matter for women's well-being and household outcomes.

Anchoring vignettes:

MAGNET will develop and test a range of new anchoring vignettes (short descriptions of hypothetical individuals or situations meant to convey complicated concepts and ensure that different respondents understand questions similarly across cultures and contexts). These vignettes will allow for the analysis of differences between spouses in the perception and interpretation of what joint decision-making entails and how women's actions are determined by social norms.

Other survey tools:

Drawing from psychology, sociology and other disciplines, MAGNET will create and validate a range of other tools to deepen our measurement of women's goal-setting and decision-making. These include:

- New bandwidth depletion measures to understand whether cognitive depletion—linked to multitasking and many small daily decisions—affects women's desire to engage in other important economic choices.
- A novel goal-setting tool, drawing on standardized goal-setting questionnaires used in psychology studies.
- An automatic cognition test to capture the extent to which women have internalized gender norms around specific activities, and sectoral and economic choices (e.g., that is more appropriate for women to work in less lucrative and competitive sectors).

Quantitative narrative analysis:

MAGNET will propose a new text-analysis measure of women's agency, drawing on text-to-speech transcripts of women's answers to open-ended questions. This method will adapt the Franzosi (1994, 2004) methodology for analyzing semi-structured interviews, attributing an automated agency score to women's narratives about how they make decisions, how they live their life and how this compares to their preferences.

Experiments and games:

MAGNET will field behavioral exercises to capture the malleability of women's preferences and to what extent they are conditioned by social norms, among other dimensions of agency.

In addition to the development and testing of these measurement tools, MAGNET will conduct mixed-methods research and triangulate across these methods to uncover new layers in our understanding of women's agency. For example, we plan to triangulate answers from decision-making questions with outcomes of lab-in-the-field experiments, direct observation, and automatic cognition tests to understand what each measurement approach is capturing and how they can complement each other.

Photo Credit: Vincent Tremeau, World Bank

This work has been funded in part by the Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality (UFGE), which is a multi-donor trust fund administered by the World Bank to advance gender equality and women's empowerment through experimentation and knowledge creation to help governments and the private sector focus policy and programs on scalable solutions with sustainable outcomes. The UFGE is supported with generous contributions from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

To learn more about our partners, please visit

World Bank Africa Gender Innovation Lab (AFRGIL)

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/africa-gender-innovation-lab>

World Bank Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS)

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/lms>

International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)

<https://www.ifpri.org/>

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

<https://www.rescue.org/>

Oxford University

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/>

Or contact

Aletheia Donald

adonald@worldbank.org

Maria Hernandez-De-Benito

mhernandezdebeni@worldbank.org