



East Asia & Pacific  
Gender

April 2021

# How to Better Capture Women's Agency Through Decision-making Measures: Five Tips from Research in the Philippines

## TIPS IN BRIEF

- Understand the local context before collecting or interpreting decision-making data
- Do not ask ONLY about who makes decisions
- Ask who makes the final decision
- Ask about involvement in the decision-making process
- Ask if respondents could make decisions if desired

## CONTEXT

Accurately measuring and understanding agency, or one's ability to make choices and achieve desired outcomes (World Development Report, 2012),<sup>1</sup> can support the design and targeting of effective development interventions, as well as tracking their impacts. Conversely, gender-blind programs that do not consider women's lower levels of agency than men may not achieve the desired impacts. For example, Bernhardt et al. (2019) show that cash grants given to female entrepreneurs do not increase their profits because the money is invested in their husband's businesses instead of their own. To maximize the effectiveness of development interventions, it is critical to understand women's agency and how agency may influence the effectiveness of program design. In addition, because promoting women's agency is also a development outcome of interest, it is necessary to track how programs shift agency and which interventions are most effective at promoting it. A clear understanding of agency and effective monitoring and evaluation rely on accurate measures of agency.

Women's decision-making in the household is frequently captured in surveys as a proxy for women's agency. Women who report being decision-makers in any given domain are considered

## EAST ASIA AND PACIFIC GENDER INNOVATION LAB

The East Asia and Pacific Gender Innovation Lab (EAPGIL) carries out impact evaluations and inferential research to generate evidence on what works in closing gender gaps in assets, economic opportunities, and agency, and how closing these gaps can help achieve other development outcomes. Ultimately, EAPGIL seeks to increase the welfare of women and men in East Asia and the Pacific by promoting the uptake of effective policies and programs identified based on evidence.

<sup>1</sup> Agency is closely related to empowerment: the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability (Kabeer 1999).

to have more agency in that domain. However, research from a variety of contexts suggests that this may be a simplification of a more complex and multi-faceted relationship between decision-making and women's agency. In particular, there is much left to learn about the best ways of measuring decision-making.

Consider Maria and Carmen, who are women in two different (fictional) farming households in the rural Philippines. Both Maria and Carmen discuss major agricultural decisions with their husbands; however, the amount of influence they have over the outcome of that discussion is different. Maria's husband usually starts these discussions and will make the final decision in line with his opinion even if Maria disagrees with him. In contrast, Carmen and her husband discuss the decision until both agree on the best thing to do, regardless of who suggested that idea. Because Carmen has a greater ability to influence choices, she has relatively more agency than Maria. However, if asked who makes agricultural decisions in their households, both women would say that both they and their husbands are decision-makers.

Using new analysis from a spousal survey with farming households in the Philippines, we explore which survey questions can accurately capture the difference in agency of women like Maria and Carmen. We also conducted qualitative work to understand why different measures of decision-making are better at capturing agency than others.

## WHAT DID WE DO?

As part of a larger impact evaluation on a nationwide land reform program, EAPGIL carried out fieldwork with farming households in the rural Philippines. Our primary sample consists of 421 matched couples. The majority of our sample was interviewed across six provinces of the island of Mindanao, while 72 households were interviewed in the Bicol region of southeastern Luzon. Interviews were carried out only with couples who were married or in common-law relationships. The spousal survey included a variety of commonly used measures of decision-making, agency and empowerment, as well as several novel measures. A qualitative study was later carried out with 40 couples in the sample, of which 20 were interviewed jointly and 20 were interviewed individually. Couples were asked in-depth about the decision-making process within their household, as well as their preferences for ideal models of decision-making and the social norms of their communities.

### TIP #1: UNDERSTAND THE LOCAL CONTEXT

The concepts of decision-making and agency are inextricably

## DEFINING AND MEASURING WOMEN'S AGENCY

*Agency*, defined as people's ability to use "capabilities and opportunities to expand the choices they have and to control their own destiny,"<sup>3</sup> is a multifaceted concept that cannot be condensed into a single survey measure. Current research has been relying on three categories of measures:<sup>4</sup>(1) a perception of control over one's life, (2) the ability to set goals in line with one's own values, and (3) the ability to act on those goals. Measures of decision-making are commonly collected in surveys as a proxy for the third facet of agency, while the second is often captured through the Relative Autonomy Index (RAI). The RAI is a scale that captures autonomy, defined as the extent to which decisions are motivated by coercion or by one's own goals and values. Decisions motivated by coercion reflect less relative autonomy, whereas decisions motivated by one's own goals and values reflect greater relative autonomy.<sup>5</sup>

A core objective of our work is to understand what types of questions about decision-making capture women's autonomy. To achieve it, we compare different decision-making measures to RAI. As different dimensions of agency are closely correlated, we expect that measures of decision-making that are reflective of agency will be associated with higher relative autonomy.

We measure the RAI through the use of vignettes, describing different ways of making decisions about agriculture.<sup>6</sup> We ask the respondent if they are similar to the protagonists of the vignettes. We give these protagonists male or female names to match the gender of the respondent.<sup>7</sup>

connected to other cultural phenomena such as gender relations and social norms. Cross-country studies have repeatedly found that the relationship between decision-making and other outcomes such as nutrition or agricultural productivity is complex and varies depending on the region and context.<sup>2</sup> For instance, while social norms dictate that men are the primary decision-makers in household finances in some regions, women may be expected to be the primary decision-makers in others.

2 Ghuman, Lee & Smith 2006; Seymour & Peterman 2018; Yount et al 2019; Peterman et al 2021; Akter et al 2017.

3 Sen 1999, 10.

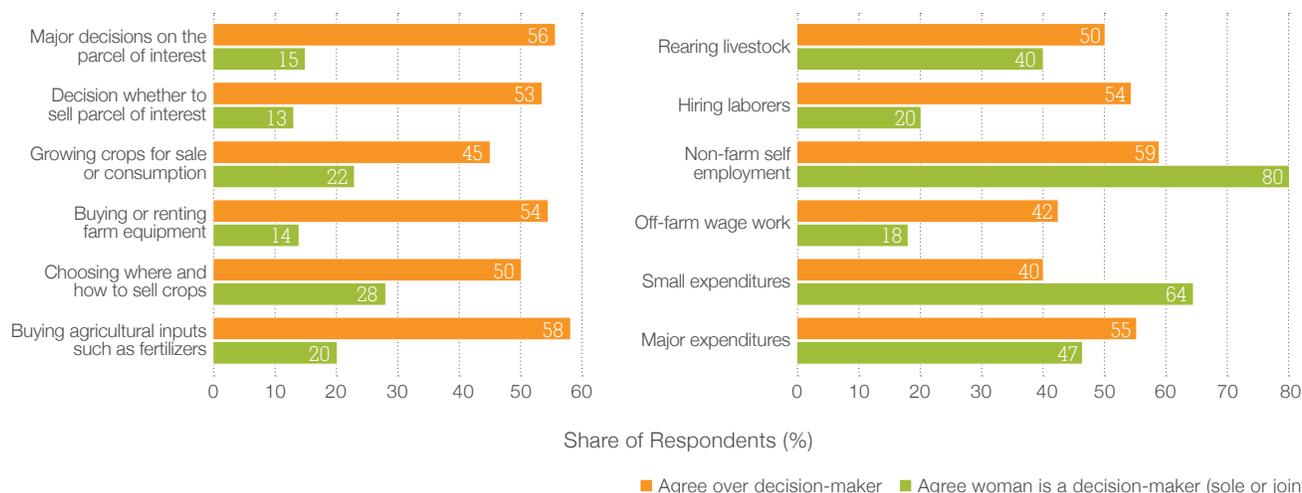
4 For a review and conceptual framework for measuring women's agency, see Donald et al (2017).

5 Ryan & Deci 2000.

6 A complete questionnaire is available upon request.

7 Full questionnaires are available upon request.

Figure 1: Spouses Disagree About Decision-making in a Wide Variety of Domains



Note: Bars in green include cases where one spouse reports that the wife is a sole decision-maker and the other spouse reports she is a joint decision-maker. This is coded as “disagreement” in the orange bars.

Understanding of what it means to make a decision and what constitutes a unilateral versus a jointly made decision vary between cultures, languages, ethnic groups and other contexts, thus complicating the creation of universal measures.<sup>8</sup> Before attempting to capture or interpret decision-making measures, teams should seek contextual information from existing studies,<sup>9</sup> by collaborating with local researchers, and conducting additional qualitative research where necessary. In our work in the Philippines, using these three strategies revealed powerful normative preferences regarding decision-making that explain many of our quantitative results, discussed below.<sup>10</sup>

**TIP #2: DO NOT ASK ONLY ABOUT WHO MAKES DECISIONS**

Women’s self-reported status as decision-makers is commonly used to capture decision-making power in household surveys. Although simple and relatively easy to capture, recent evidence from spousal surveys in a variety of contexts suggests a potential problem: when spouses are asked the same questions about who makes decisions about any given activity, they frequently give different answers.<sup>11</sup> Our

sample is no exception: we find that for any given activity, husbands and wives give the same reports on who makes decisions only 50.2% of the time, although this varies by activity (Figure 1). The large share of discrepancies suggests that asking who makes decisions likely suffers from consequential measurement issues and provides a biased picture of decision-making.<sup>12</sup> Our results from the Philippines suggest two additional reasons to avoid relying on this measure in a similar context.

First, we find that respondents likely have differing interpretations of answer options. In our sample, the majority of differences between spouses’ answers are cases where one spouse reports that the decision was made together with their spouse (a “joint” decision), while the other reports that it was made by only one person (a “sole” decision). In qualitative interviews with respondents, joint decisions captured everything from one spouse notifying the other about the decision without seeking input to a fully collaborative process in which discussions continued until a consensus was reached.<sup>13</sup> Without a clear definition of what is meant by making a decision or what would constitute a joint decision, surveys asking who

8 As such, while the findings in this brief are broadly supported by similar work in other countries, more research is necessary to determine to how applicable they are to other contexts. Researchers and practitioners should always start by considering how the context in which they are working may influence measuring and understanding decision-making and agency.

9 To find a broader range of studies, seek evidence from a variety of social sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, or psychology. Actively seek studies written by local researchers.

10 We are grateful to Prudenciano Gordoncillo, Aries Arugay, and Aletheia Valenciano for their valuable contributions on different parts of this study. Useful references for this study on decision-making in the Philippine context included Malapit et al 2020, Medina 2001, Bayudan-Dacuycuy 2011, David 1994, and Contado 1981. We thank Agnes Quisumbing for helpful comments and references.

11 See, for instance, Anderson, Reynolds & Gugerty (2017) in Tanzania; Amugsi et al (2016) in Ghana; Donald et al (2017) in Sub-Saharan Africa; Ghuman Lee & Smith in Asia; and Ambler et al (2021) in Bangladesh.

12 The literature suggests discrepancies arise due to a variety of reasons, including random measurement error (Ghuman, Lee and Smith, 2006), systematically different interpretations of survey questions (Donald et al., 2021, Ambler et al., 2021), asymmetric information (Ambler et al., 2021), social desirability bias (Jejeeboy, 2002), or the effects of enumerator gender (Alwang et al., 2016).

13 This finding is aligned with Bernard et al. (2020) who find that some reasons for considering a decision to be joint are more empowering than others, as well as Acosta et al. (2020) who show that one spouse (generally the husband in their sample) can dominate the “joint” decision-making process, leading to overestimates of the extent to which it captures gender equality.

makes decisions will involve significant measurement error, which may lead to biased or misleading results if different individuals interpret the questions in different ways. Differences in the way joint decisions are carried out between households will also not be captured when only asking about the decision-maker, leading to imprecise measurement.

Second, we find that declaring oneself as a decision-maker (either alone or jointly) is not correlated with respondents' Relative Autonomy Index (Figure 3; see Box 2 for more information on how we measure agency and autonomy). Measurement error may affect this relationship, however. Indeed, when the answers of both spouses are compared, we find that cases where husbands and wives agree that the wife is a decision-maker are significantly associated with higher overall autonomy for the wife.<sup>14</sup> This clearer relationship with women's autonomy may reflect a more consequential role played by women in the decision making process that is recognized by both spouses. The weak relationship between decision-making and autonomy may also be linked with social norms and the consequences of decision-making. Our qualitative work reveals a very strong normative preference for consultative decision-making, with most respondents preferring some kind of conversation with their spouse before any kind of major decision. Sole decisions were seen as riskier and even disempowering, as the decision-maker was more likely to take the blame for any negative consequences of the decision.

### TIP #3: ASK WHO MAKES THE FINAL DECISION

Our qualitative and quantitative work suggests multiple issues with the most commonly used measure of decision-making—asking who makes decisions—especially due to the difficulty of defining “joint” decision-making. To test how much different interpretations of joint decision-making affect discrepancies found in spousal surveys, we also ask spouses who could make the *final* decision in the case of disagreement over major agricultural decisions, eliminating the “joint” option. We find that in this case spouses give the same answer 78 percent of the time, an increase of 22 percentage points. We also find that, while being a decision-maker is not associated with greater autonomy for women, being the *final* decision-maker in case of disagreement is.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, in a context in which men maintain final decision-making authority in the vast majority of cases, the question of who could make the final decision alone is likely insufficient to capture the nuances of relative levels of agency within a survey sample. As such, its use alone or in combination with other questions should be determined after fully understanding the local context (Tip #1).

### TIP #4: ASK ABOUT INVOLVEMENT IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Even when women do not make the final decision, they may be able to influence it in a myriad of ways during

Figure 2: Spouses are Much More Likely to Agree About the Process of Decision-making Than They are on the Decision-maker

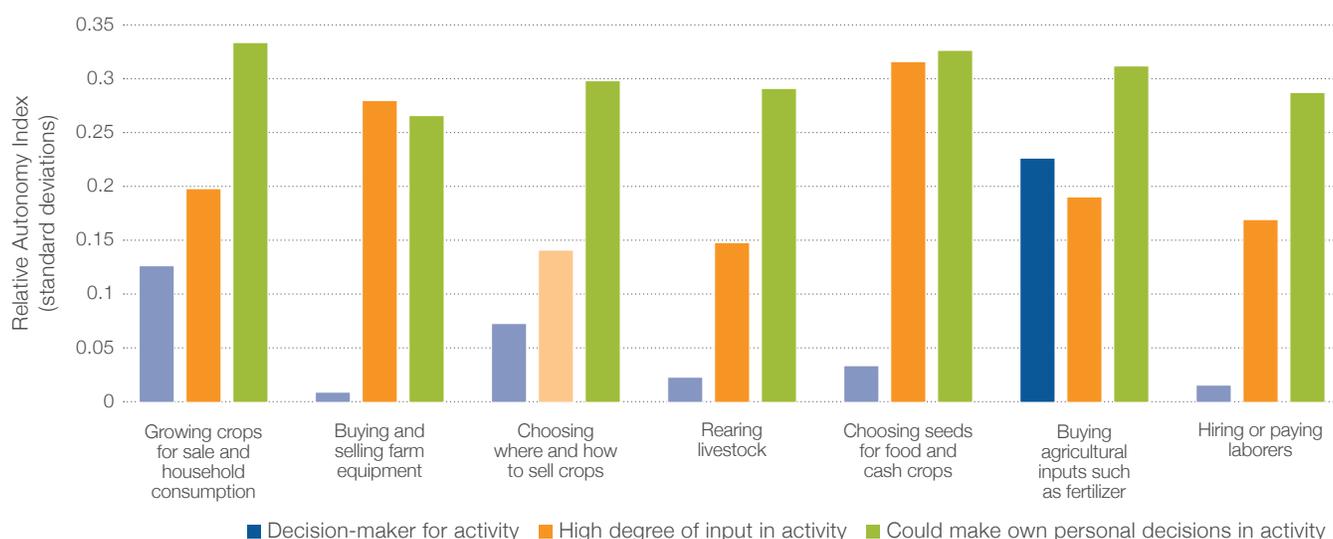


Note: Orange bars represent agreement on decision-making in various domains of agriculture, while green bars represent agreement over the decision-making process.

14 In Ghana and Bangladesh, Seymour & Peterman (2018) similarly find that agreement between spouses affects the relationship between decision-making and autonomy.

15 We find no significant association between being the final decision-maker and men's autonomy, most likely because husbands are the final decision-makers in the majority of cases.

Figure 3: Input into Decisions and the Ability to Make Decisions are More Predictive of Autonomy than Whether One is the Decision-maker



Notes: Graph represents the coefficients of each variable regressed on the respondent's Relative Autonomy Index (RAI), converted into standard deviations. Regression includes controls for province, age, age difference between spouses whether women own agricultural land and have off-farm income, and the gender of the enumerator. Light-colored bars represent coefficients that are not significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ .

conversations and negotiations before the decision is made. Qualitative work with our sample suggests that is often the case, with both spouses having varying degrees of input in almost all major decisions. In addition to asking who makes decisions, we asked respondents in our survey how much *input* they had into these decisions, a measure suggested in the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI).<sup>16</sup> We find that having input into decisions related to agricultural activities is a much better predictor of autonomy than being a decision-maker in that activity, with having a high level of input into a decision associated with a 0.2 standard deviation increase in RAI on average (Figure 3). We find that spouses are much more likely to agree about the process of making major agricultural decisions than they are to agree about who makes the decisions (Figure 2).

#### TIP #5: ASK IF RESPONDENTS COULD MAKE DECISIONS IF DESIRED

An additional nuance of decision-making that is not captured when asking only about the decision-maker is the role of choice (or lack thereof). While men and women may be decision-makers in an area because they are empowered to do so, it may also be due to social norms that dictate which decisions men should make and which

decisions women should make. In some cases, *not* being a decision-maker may be more reflective of agency, particularly if men or women are normatively expected to be decision-makers in a certain area, but choose not to.<sup>17</sup> For example, not being a sole decision maker about daily meals may be a manifestation of agency for a woman who chooses to run a business and negotiates with her partner that he shares in decision-making burden. To capture a more nuanced aspect of decision-making, we ask respondents if they could make their own personal decisions in various domains *if they wanted to*.<sup>18</sup> We find that this measure is very strongly predictive of autonomy, with the ability to make one's own personal decisions in agriculture – if one chose – associated with a 0.3 standard deviation increase in autonomy (Figure 3).

#### CONCLUSIONS: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SURVEY DESIGN?

Our work in the Philippines suggests that the most common decision-making measure used in surveys may not reliably capture agency because we do not find the expected relationship between these measures and another aspect of agency – autonomy. However, we find that slight modifications of these measures may improve

<sup>16</sup> Alkire et al 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Kabeer 1999.

<sup>18</sup> This and other measures are drawn from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), a survey tool designed to capture women's empowerment in a variety of aspects, including decision-making.

## EXAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONS

<p><b>Do you or any member of your household participate in [activity]?</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Yes</li> <li>2. No &gt; <b>skip to next activity or module</b></li> </ol>
<p><b>How much input would you say you have in major decisions about [activity]?</b></p> <p><b>READ OPTIONS ALOUD</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. No input or input in a few decisions</li> <li>2. Input on some decisions</li> <li>3. Input in most or all decisions</li> </ol>
<p><b>To what extent do you feel you could make your own personal decisions on [activity] if you wanted to?</b></p> <p><b>READ OPTIONS ALOUD</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Not at all</li> <li>2. To a small extent</li> <li>3. To a large extent</li> </ol>
<p><b>If there were a disagreement about decisions related to [activity], who would make the final decision?</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Self</li> <li>2. Spouse</li> <li>3. Other household member</li> </ol>

researchers' ability to capture agency. A suggested survey module can be found below; the questions shown there can be used either to examine general decision-making in a particular domain or for a roster of specific activities. The first three questions are drawn from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index, which provides multiple other measures aimed at capturing various facets of empowerment and agency.<sup>19</sup>

An important word of caution, however: while the questions below have been validated by our work in the Philippines and in other country contexts, this module is not meant as a replacement for background work on understanding the local context and how questions may be interpreted differently in those contexts. Additional or alternative measures may be more applicable depending on the purpose and local context of the study. Valuable information on the decision-making process and agency over decision-making may be gathered through the addition of further questions on the nature of discussions that occur before a decision is made, including who is part of those discussions and the likelihood that those discussions can change the outcome of the decision. The value of these or other decision-making variables may depend in large part on the context and intent of the survey, or how translations of these questions are interpreted by respondents.

Such survey modules, or adaptations of them based on the local context, can help both researchers and policymakers better understand women's agency and decision-making and how they may be affected by interventions or policy

changes. Development research would benefit by using measures that are less prone to measurement error, and conclusions based on measures that better capture agency would have more policy relevance. Because boosting women's agency is a targeted development outcome, it is important to include indicators in project monitoring and evaluation that shed light on whether programs are on track to achieve results. In the context of the rural Philippines, tracking the input women have in decision-making and their ability to make decisions if desired would be useful indicators, as these are both strongly related to agency and relatively straightforward to ask.

These findings also shed light on ways that development projects can be better designed to promote women's agency. Incentivizing women to make decisions in realms they otherwise have little interest in may not necessarily translate into increased agency. Evidence from the literature suggests this may only increase women's time burden, and evidence from our qualitative work suggests that decision-making can have some negative consequences, including stress or worry about the burden of responsibility for the outcome of the decision. However, interventions that enable women to have input or make decisions if desired may hold promise, as these aspects of decision-making are linked with women's agency. For example, projects can ensure that women have equal access to information that would enable them to make informed choices or contribute meaningfully to household discussions, as well as expanding the choices women are able to make.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Alkire et al 2013.

<sup>20</sup> The findings of the impact evaluation to which this work is linked led to an emphasis on involving both spouses in communications and the process related to the land reform intervention.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This brief is a product of collaboration between EAPGIL, Gender CCSA, Poverty GP and DECDG. It was prepared by Forest Jarvis, Hillary Johnson, and Elizaveta Perova, with inputs from Aletheia Donald, Sundas Liaqat, and Aries Arugay. We gratefully acknowledge funding from the Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality (UFGE) to carry out this work. EAPGIL is supported by UFGE in partnership with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. UFGE has received generous contributions from Australia, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States.

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