



Context and measurement: An analysis of the relationship between intrahousehold decision making and autonomy

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ABSTRACT

Using data from two culturally distinct locales, Bangladesh and Ghana, we investigate whether men and women who report sole decision making in a particular domain experience stronger (or weaker) feelings of autonomous motivation—measured using the Relative Autonomy Index (RAI)—compared to those who report joint decision making. Used primarily in psychology, the RAI measures the extent to which an individual's actions are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, where higher scores indicate greater autonomy. On aggregate, we find differences between men and women, and across countries, in the significance of association between the individual's level of participation in decision-making and autonomy. In addition, we find heterogeneity in the strength of this association, depending on the domain (e.g., productive versus personal decisions) and whether partners agree on who normally makes decisions. These findings imply that details related to context and measurement matter for understanding individual decision-making power. We argue that all research using information on decision-making should include a careful analysis of men's and women's perceptions of decision making within the household, which may be useful for calibrating indicators to suit specific contexts.

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1. Introduction

The past decade has seen increased attention to measuring women's empowerment and autonomy, motivated largely by the goal of identifying promising programs and policies for reducing gender inequalities. For the first time, the empowerment of women and girls is included in the Sustainable Development Goals as a stand-alone target. Yet, a lack of high-quality sex-disaggregated data—as well as ambiguity about how best to define and measure empowerment—makes it difficult to confidently measure gender inequalities and to assess the impact of development interventions on girls and women in many settings (Gammage, Kabeer, & Rodgers, 2016; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Klein, 2016; Peterman, Schwab, Roy, Hidrobo, & Gilligan, 2015; Richardson, 2017).

In the social sciences, most approaches to defining and measuring empowerment are based on the concept of agency, defined by Sen as the “ability to use those capabilities and opportunities to expand the choices they have and to control their own destiny” (1999, 10), and focus on women's ability to participate in decision

making over certain important matters (e.g., major household purchases, personal healthcare, or visits with friends and relatives). Questions about decision making are routinely collected in several large-scale surveys and contribute to a large body of evidence on how socioeconomic, health, and demographic outcomes are linked with women's empowerment and agency.¹ However, despite their widespread use, uncertainty persists about how to construct indicators of women's empowerment based on these questions (Agarwal, 1997; Basu & Koolwal, 2005; Peterman et al., 2015). In particular, it is unclear to what extent sole and joint decision making, respectively, should be considered different expressions of individual decision-making power and to what extent joint decision making reflects a consistent understanding of decision-making power within households.

This paper takes a first step toward bridging these gaps by interrogating several of the most common critiques of household decision-making indicators using comparative information on women's autonomy. Following psychologists working on a theory of motivation known as Self-Determination Theory (SDT), we

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¹ A set of decision-making questions has been included in Demographic and Health Surveys since the late 1990s, with the most recent round covering more than 40 developing countries globally.

depart from the standard approach of treating autonomy as interchangeable with empowerment and instead conceptualize autonomy in terms of the motivations behind a person's actions (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000).² In the parlance of SDT, "motivational" autonomy is defined as behavior that is experienced as willingly enacted and fully endorsed by a person. Thus, just as with Sen's notion of agency, this definition emphasizes a person's ability to act on behalf of his or her own personal values. Given this similarity, greater understanding of the relationship between motivational autonomy and decision making may provide insights into the robustness and validity of utilizing decision-making data to measure women's empowerment.

To this end, using data from two culturally distinct locales, Bangladesh and Ghana, we investigate whether respondents who report sole decision making in a particular domain tend to experience stronger (or weaker) feelings of autonomous motivation than those who report joint decision making. Specifically, we use multivariate regression models to estimate the association between a quantitative measure of motivational autonomy—the Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000)—and, respectively, sole and joint decision-making outcomes. The RAI assigns a score to each decision domain based on survey questions that measure the extent to which an individual's actions within the domain are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, where higher scores indicate greater autonomy. On aggregate, we find that the significance of association between feelings of autonomous motivation and sole and joint decision-making, respectively, differs between men and women. Furthermore, we find heterogeneity in the strength of this association, depending on the domain and whether or not partners provide the same answers to questions about who normally makes decisions within the domain. Hence, the main lesson from our study is that the relationship between autonomy and sole or joint decision is heterogeneous, depending largely on cultural context and the domain of decision making.

To the extent that we believe autonomy is correlated with empowerment—as suggested by the literature, but not empirically confirmed in our analysis—our findings contribute to the discourse on measuring women's empowerment and have implications for the broader use of decision-making indicators in development research. In particular, our analysis provides evidence of significant gender- and domain-specific variation in the association between autonomy and sole and joint decision making, respectively. This suggests, on one hand, that the common practice of treating sole and joint decision making as equivalent indicators of individual decision-making power may be inappropriate in some contexts. On the other hand, our results caution that, as a field, we are still far from understanding how generalized measures of autonomy and decision making relate to each other and to broader development objectives, such as empowerment and agency.

Note that although we frame the policy and programming relevance of our findings in terms of women's outcomes, our analysis utilizes data from both men and women. By doing so, we are able to add insight as to whether men's and women's reports agree on decision-making dynamics, as well as on how taking this heterogeneity into account affects our conclusions. Last, we expand our analysis beyond decision-making domains typically attributed to women and consider as well traditionally male-dominated productive and economic domains.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 discusses measurement issues in intrahousehold decision making and further develops the concept of motivational autonomy. Section 3 describes the data and offers context for our analysis. Section 4 reviews the

methodology used in the analysis. Section 5 presents our results. Section 6 concludes with a discussion of policy and research implications.

2. Review of decision making and autonomy in development research

2.1. Measuring intrahousehold decision making

Women's participation in intrahousehold decision making is frequently used as a metric of empowerment. The most common approach to operationalizing decision making in this manner involves condensing sole and joint decision making into a single (binary) indicator: having a "say" in a particular decision (Alkire et al., 2013; Allendorf, 2007; Anderson & Eswaran, 2009).³ Others have separated these dynamics, or analyzed only whether decisions are made solely or jointly with spouses or other household members (Bonilla et al., 2017; de Brauw, Gilligan, Hoddinott, & Roy, 2014; Handa, Peterman, Davis, & Stampini, 2009; Kishor & Subaiya, 2008). A potential problem with both approaches is that they implicitly assume that either sole and joint decision making are equally empowering for women, or alternatively that sole decisions are more empowering as compared to joint decisions. A lack of empirical evidence as to the conditions under which these assumptions hold or does not hold has led to ambiguity about how empowering having a say in a decision actually is for women (Deere & Twyman, 2012; Heckert & Fabric, 2013; Peterman et al., 2015). This uncertainty stems from several limitations, which have heretofore received insufficient attention in the literature.

First and foremost, it is unclear to what extent being a joint participant in a decision reflects having a meaningful voice in the decision-making process, and how indicators might be constructed to capture any subtle differences. This concern stems, in part, from a lack of contextual details about the decision-making process itself—knowing who made a decision does not reveal everything about the mechanics of how a decision was made. For instance, joint decision making when all participants agree may reflect a different dynamic than joint decision making when there is conflict. In such cases, knowing what tends to happen when participants in a decision disagree with one another can provide valuable insight into the extent to which joint decision making reflects compromise among participants or capitulation by some participants to the wishes of another (dominant) participant. Although compromise may reflect empowerment, capitulation may or may not. These questions are further complicated by the fact that decisions are not discrete, and are often made iteratively. For example, spouses may make a joint decision in which one party undertakes 'tacit agreement' while not completely accepting the agreement and planning to open and contest the decision at a later date (Agarwal, 1997).

Another factor that complicates the interpretation of joint decision making concerns household composition. In households with several adult members, decisions are more likely to be made jointly due to sharing of resources and responsibilities among household members. In such households, it may be especially important to consider with whom joint decisions are made, because the implications for empowerment may be very different if a woman makes a decision jointly with her spouse or with her father, mother-in-law, or son (Doss, 2013; Heckert & Fabric, 2013; Peterman et al., 2015). Similarly, the interpretation of sole decision making can also vary depending on the extent to which women are

² Anderson and Eswaran (2009), Cheong et al. (2017), Eswaran and Malhotra (2011); Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) all measured autonomy, at least partly, in terms of women's ability to make decisions within their households.

³ Although not all of these studies focus on women's "empowerment" per se, the underlying concepts under scrutiny are similar (agency, autonomy, bargaining power, status, etc.).

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