

## **Power and Process: Women's influence in the process of decision-making**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The amount of influence a woman has in decision-making is a key indicator of women's empowerment and the power dynamics of gender relationships (Balk, 1994; Hindin, 2002; Kritz & Makinwa-Adebusoye, 1999; Malhotra & Mather, 1997). The research literature on household decision-making has reinforced the notion that men make more decisions than women; that women's say in decision-making is generally circumscribed to matters of less importance and with smaller financial and consequential implications, and that men's authority extends into women's personal realms such as the way their own wages are spent.

In this paper, we question whether literature is where it is because the measure of "final say" is what is usual, with the implicit assumption that the person who has "final say" in making a decision is the one who actually makes the decision. We employ data from Accra, Ghana to develop a novel survey measure of the process of household decision-making. We further use the decision-making measure to investigate the nature and levels of women's involvement in household decision-making in four arenas and compare these to the "final say" measure.

We employ this measure to ask the following questions about four different arenas of household decision-making relevant to our sample: First, does women's amount of involvement in decision-making differ by kind of decision? Second, which parts of the decision-making process are more important in the decision-making score for different arenas? And finally, how does the involvement score in the different arenas compare to the "final say" measure?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The data for this paper come from three focus group discussions (FGDs) with married men and women and a survey of 391 women in Ga Mashie, Accra, Ghana. The FGD's were conducted in August 2010 and the survey took place in November and December 2010. Ethical approval was obtained from the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research Institutional Review Board (CPN # 049/09-10). The FGDs explored the prevalent norms and patterns regarding marriage in the study community, and helped determine which decision-making domains were relevant to the study population. These findings provided important contextual information for the survey, and helped situate the analysis of findings. Survey respondents were women who were married at the time of the survey, regardless of whether they were co-habiting with their partner or not.

The structured questionnaire asked about the socioeconomic, demographic and relationship characteristics of couples and the actual decision-making processes and outcomes in their homes. The arenas of decision-making included on the survey were: 1. Household production and consumption; 2. Children; 3. Gift-giving to extended family and friends and; 4. Decisions on freedom of movement of the woman.

Five questions that are directly related to measuring the involvement of women in decision-making were used to compute an involvement score for each arena. The responses for each of these questions were weighted by factor analyses using principal component analyses as the extraction method and the resultant scores summed up to give a weighted score for each respondent.

To answer the three research questions, we employ means with confidence intervals and a paired samples t-test for the first question, the factor loadings for the first extracted factor in the factor analyses for question two and group means with associated confidence intervals as well as ANOVA with post hoc tests for question three.

### **RESULTS**

We find that whilst there is influence from other people (apart from the spouses) in decision-making in these arenas, in the majority, only the couple are involved in decision-making. The majority of decisions involve some discussion. Discussion on investment decisions are initiated primarily by husbands, whilst those on children's education are initiated primarily by wives. We find spouses having "final say" a majority of the time in investment decision-making and women having "final say" a majority of the time in gift-giving

decisions. Finally, women report joint winning in the majority, for investment and education decision whilst winning in the other two categories is skewed towards jointly winning or the wife winning. From the involvement scores computed, women were most involved in making decisions about their freedom of movement whilst they were least involved in making decisions about major investments. However, there was no statistical difference in women's level of involvement across arenas. A paired samples t-test conducted between the sets of variables revealed that the only significant difference in means (at the 10% significance level) was between investment decisions and freedom of movement decisions.

To answer our second research question, we use the findings from the factor analyses. Table 1 shows which variable loadings were significantly high for the first factor that was extracted for each arena. The cut-off point used was 0.4 (See the rule of thumb in Pituch & Stevens, 2016). We find that in all of the arenas, the first component does not load on the variable which explores whether other persons were involved in the decision-making. In general, for investment and children's education decisions, the first component extracted loads strongly and positively on the factors that represent no discussion (rather than there being a discussion initiated by the woman or a discussion initiated by her spouse / someone else), the woman having final say and the woman feeling that she is the winner in decision-making in that arena. Conversely, the loadings are negative and significant for the spouse or both of them having final say and for both of them winning in making that decision. Thus, there is an indication of the greatest variance in the decision-making pattern being represented by undertones of independent decision-making by women.

**Table 1: Factor loadings for questions in different arenas of decision-making**

<b>Variable/category</b>	<b>Investment N=336</b>	<b>Children's education N=306</b>	<b>Gift-giving N=299</b>	<b>Freedom of movement N=104</b>
<b>Persons involved in decision-making</b>				
Others involved	-0.008	-0.021	0.041	0.113
Couple only	0.008	0.021	-0.041	-0.113
<b>Discussion and initiation of discussion</b>				
No discussion	0.710	0.717	-0.503	-0.773
Spouse/someone else initiates discussion	-0.375	-0.279	0.665	0.506
Woman initiates discussion	-0.131	-0.118	-0.141	0.254
<b>Who has final say</b>				
Spouse/someone else	-0.432	-0.291	0.873	-0.008
Both woman and spouse	-0.267	-0.499	-0.190	0.836
Woman	0.864	0.795	-0.616	-0.807
<b>Winner in decision-making</b>				
Spouse/someone else	-0.206	-0.089	0.840	0.050
Both woman and spouse	-0.432	-0.693	-0.091	0.852
Woman	0.866	0.854	-0.505	-0.876
<b>Initial eigenvalue of 1<sup>st</sup> component extracted</b>	<b>2.945</b>	<b>3.163</b>	<b>3.804</b>	<b>4.456</b>

Source: Computed from primary data collected in Accra, 2010

For gift-giving decisions, the first factor indicates domination by spouses and loads strongest on the spouse initiating the discussion, having final say and winning. Freedom of movement decisions however, lean towards joint decision-making being the strongest pattern observed. The factor loads positively on a discussion initiated by the spouse, joint "final say" and joint winning and away from there being a lack of discussion or the woman having "final say" and feeling she won.

### **Comparison of Involvement Scores for Different People Who Have "Final Say" In Making Decisions**

In Table 2, mean involvement scores are compared for different categories of people who had "final say" in decision-making. Its purpose is to investigate how the influence of women in the process of decision-making differs between when women have "final say" alone or joint "final say" with their spouse or their spouse has "final say" alone.

**Table 2: Involvement score for arenas for different people who had “final say”**

		Spouse		Both		Respondent	
Who had the “final say”:		Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
<b>investment</b>							
Mean		-0.93	0.410	-0.83	0.368	1.54	0.929
95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	-0.99		-0.91		1.30	
	Upper Bound	-0.87		-0.76		1.77	
Percent of total		53.4		27.2		18.5	
<b>children’s education</b>							
Mean		-0.78	0.500	-1.28	0.301	1.22	0.900
95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	-0.88		-1.34		1.044	
	Upper Bound	-0.68		-1.23		1.39	
Percent of total		32.2		34.2		32.6	
<b>gift-giving</b>							
Mean		1.54	0.783	-0.07	0.514	-1.37	0.396
95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	1.37		-0.20		-1.43	
	Upper Bound	1.72		0.06		-1.30	
Percent of total		26.5		21.5		52.0	
<b>freedom of movement</b>							
Mean		0.30	0.868	1.91	0.431	-2.18	0.649
95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Lower Bound	-0.06		1.77		-2.38	
	Upper Bound	0.65		2.05		-1.99	
Percent of total		22.8		36.8		40.4	

Source: Computed from primary data collected in Accra, 2010

Comparing the level of involvement of women in decision-making for different categories of who has “final say” shows that decisions patterns are different for the four arenas. First, the confidence intervals and box plots (not shown) of the mean involvement scores for the different groups of final say (woman, spouse or both) indicate that apart from investment decisions, in which there is about the same level of involvement of women whether it is their spouse alone who has final say or there is joint final say, for all other decisions, there are significant differences between the involvement scores of women for each ‘final say’ category. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) with both Tukey’s HSD and Games-Howell post hoc tests confirmed this.

For investment and children’s education decisions, when a woman had final say all alone, she had a significantly higher involvement score. However, for gift-giving and freedom of movement, women who had sole final say were significantly less involved in the decision-making.

## DISCUSSION

This method of measuring women’s involvement in the process of household decision-making shows that for our sample at least, women’s amount of involvement in decision-making in various arenas is quite homogenous. There were only marginally significant differences between women’s involvement in investment decision-making and their freedom of movement decision-making compared to the other arenas as indicated by our paired samples t-tests.

The results support the general literature on financial and investment decision-making all over the world where, even in contemporary times, we find men dominating (Hanna & Lindamood, 2016; Kim et al., 2019). However, our weighted measure ended up showing that women’s level of influence even in these male-dominant spheres is not negligible. We believe that including the question on ‘who the winner was’ shows whether even if a woman is not highly involved in decision-making in a particular arena, she considers the decision to still have been made in her interest and with her implicit preferences considered. This is a key angle to explore in future studies as in the interest of efficiency, whilst not every household decision will be made jointly, it is important to consider interests and needs of the ‘silent’ actors.

For gift and freedom of movement decisions, even though some women report that they are not relevant decision making arenas, for those for whom a conscious decision was made in these two arenas, we see that the dominant pattern seems to be towards spouses initiating the discussion and being prominent in the decision-making. Other work has been done that suggests that Ga women have autonomy only in areas in which they are allowed to be autonomous (Pellow, 1978), indicating that where there are such limitations, they extend into even these realms culturally demarcated as personal.

Finally, our comparison of the final say measure with our computed involvement score indicates that women are more highly involved in decision-making in their homes than asking only about “final say” would have revealed. While we find that women who had “final say” alone in making investment and education decisions had significantly higher involvement scores than for joint or spousal final say, we find for the two ‘lesser’ decisions (gifts and freedom) that, a woman not having final say actually indicated higher involvement in the decision-making. These women are probably involved in the decision-making discussion initiation, steering discussions towards their preference and may even use other covert ways of influence to have their preferences implemented. Thus though the “final say” measure may, in some instances, be a good indicator of a woman’s ‘approximate level of involvement’ in household decision-making, in other instances, this may not be the case. The utility of this process approach is that it gives added insight into a woman’s role at different points of the process of decision-making, and this additional information is useful for targeting interventions for increasing women’s empowerment and policymaking.

There are several limitations of this study. In questioning about decision-making we asked about how decisions are *usually* made. If decisions are made one-way half of the time and another way the other half of the time (or in some other proportion), we would have lost that nuance. We would recommend that in further work, the decision-making questions are targeted towards specific decision-making episodes; for example, the last time the decision was made. Second, in constructing our weighted involvement score, we only applied the weights for the first component that was extracted in the factor analyses for each arena. The weighting therefore corresponds to the most dominant pattern inherent in the data from the perspective of the procedure we used. It is possible that another method of weighting the involvement scores would have resulted in a different pattern of involvement. However, the procedure that was used is a standard one used to apply weights to data in creating indexes by the Demographic and Health Surveys and other researchers.

In the light of our findings, we recommend the following. First, since different arenas of decision-making have different process and influence patterns as shown by the patterns of answers that emerged, rather than study decision-making as a unidimensional concept, it is important to parse it out into the various arenas. This means that rather than ask a general question in the line of, “who usually makes decisions” researchers should be specific about what aspect of decision-making is important to a particular research purpose and ask questions specifically about that arena. Second, our method should be tested in other communities to confirm its reliability and validity. Repeated use will aid in refining it. Further, this will contribute towards its use as a tool that will provide generalizable population estimates.

## **CONCLUSION**

We find, with our measure of women’s involvement in household decision-making, that though women’s level of involvement in different arenas seems to be quite homogenous, the patterns of decision-making and of women’s influence in decision-making vary for different arenas. Women are not relegated to the background in household decision-making as much as we might conclude when only “who has final say” is considered. Women who do not have “final say” still do have some involvement in decision-making, and even women who are not involved in the “final say” in decision-making may have greater influence than those who have the “final say”. Refining this method of studying the process of household decision-making will give more in-depth information that can be used to influence policy and practice in women’s empowerment.

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