

Measuring gender dynamics: The meaning of "joint" decisions in household surveys

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**Abstract:**

Over the past decade, household decision-making patterns have become key measures of gender dynamics. This paper focuses on the measurement and classification of joint decision-making using multiple data sources. Based on Demographic and Health Surveys data, joint decision-making is common in some countries and across domains. Using data from DHS III, semi-structured interviews conducted in Harare, Zimbabwe, and the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey (CLHNS) from the Philippines, it is evident that questions about decision-making need to distinguish between joint input and joint final say. Questions from the CLHNS about how many out of six total votes husbands and wives would get in household decisions indicate that joint input, even if the husband or wife has final say alone, reflect nearly equal decision-making power--these results are likely to vary by social context and domain of decision-making. Recommendations for how to measure decision-making in household surveys are provided.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, primarily driven by the Demographic and Health surveys, one of the key measures of gender dynamics within households has been household decision-making. Beginning with selected surveys in DHS ROUND III, surveys included questions about women's ability to make household decisions in a range of domains. The surveys in this round that included decision-making led researchers to a first opportunity to link decision-making to demographic outcomes such as fertility, contraceptive use, and nutritional status (Govindasamy & Malhotra, 1996; Hindin, 2003; Hindin, 2000a; Hindin, 2000b; Moursund & Kravdal, 2003) (Kishor, 1998). Measures of decision-making and demographic outcomes have been incorporated and analyzed in other household surveys as well (Mason & Smith, 2000; Morgan, Stash, Smith & Mason, 2002; Beegle, Frankenberg & Thomas, 2001; Beegle et al., 2001; Bloom, Wypij & Das Gupta, 2001; Koenig, Ahmed, Hossain & Khorshed Alam Mozumder, 2003). While decision-making is not the only measure of women's empowerment or gender dynamics, it has become a common measure in demographic research. This paper seeks to highlight some of the strengths and limitations of the measurement and analysis of household decision-making in household surveys.

Couple communication and joint decision-making, in the context of large household surveys are often considered one in the same. Evidence suggests couple communication and joint decision-making can lead to more positive health outcomes (Hindin & Adair, 2002a), particularly for contraceptive use (Bawah, 2002; Al Riyami, Afifi & Mabry, 2004). The terms couple communication and joint decision-making, in particular, connote a degree of equality of input. However, this is not necessarily the case. For example, even when joint decisions are reported, the final decisions can be made by a single person, such as the husband (Petro-Nustas, 1999; Becker & Costenbader, 2001; Wolff, Blanc & Ssekamatte-Ssebuliba, 2000). Some researchers have also opted to combine joint or wife final say into the same category as a measure of women having at least some (if not all) input into the decisions (Kishor, 1998; Moursund & Kravdal, 2003). Other surveys, have focused on final say being by the husband, wife or joint. This results in joint input but individual final say being combined with categories where decisions are made by only one partner. In some settings, others outside the couple have input or final say in decisions, and it is also common that the decision-maker can vary depending on the domain of the decision (e.g. (Harvey, Beckman, Browner & Sherman, 2002).

In addition to the categorizing of data once they are collected, there are other important methodological issues to consider when using decision-making patterns as a measure of gender or, as has been done in much of the recent literature, as a measure of women's status or empowerment. First, it has usually been the case that only one member of the couple has been asked the series of questions potentially leading to inaccurate or incomplete information (Rahman & Rao, 2004). This limitation makes the targeting of reproductive health programs more difficult (Becker, 1996; Becker & Robinson, 1998). Second, understanding the relative importance of different domains in each social context (Ghuman, 2003) and for each demographic outcome has often been overlooked. Many of the central issues to measuring empowerment, and decision-making as a measure of empowerment, are contained in a report commissioned by The World Bank (Malhotra, Schuler & Boender, 2002).

A final methodological issue concerns the availability of data due to questionnaire wording. Researchers interested in decision-making patterns and demographic outcomes have used the available data in the Demographic and Health Surveys. The DHS began including questions on household decision-making in DHS III (1992-1997). (In DHS II, there was a single question added to surveys that asked women who working for pay, if they were able to decide about how their earnings would be used). DHS III included a

few questions regarding household decision-making in a few countries (see Appendix 1 from the 1994 Zimbabwe DHS). This set of questions allowed researchers to code the data based on who had input into the decisions (multiple responses allowed) and then who had “the greatest say in the decision.” The limitation of this method is that there is no option for the greatest say being made “jointly” by the respondent and her partner/husband. The DHS+ surveys (1997-2003) included decision-making questions, like those in Appendix 2. This single question allows for joint decision-making, but does not allow for a pattern whereby two (or more) contribute to the decision, but only one has the final say. For example, the respondent may report that her husband has the final say in decisions, but her contribution is not considered if she doesn't have the final say even if she has input into the decision. The impact of these two types of questions is discussed further in the results section. The range of responses across countries will be examined and detailed data in Zimbabwe and the Philippines will be used to enhance understanding of the issues.

### **Methods**

Several different features of joint decision-making are described using simple tabulations. First, the prevalence of joint decisions in the DHS+ surveys are shown. Second, an illustrative example of the discrepancies that can arise from alternative methods of measuring joint decision-making is shown. Finally, a newer methodology to capture joint decisions is described and preliminary results are given.

### **Results**

The first set of results, described in Table 1, shows the levels of joint final decision-making across all countries with available data in DHS+ (4 A.D.). The questions allowed for five different response categories as to who had the final say: (1) Respondent Alone, (2) Husband/Partner, (3) Respondent and Husband Jointly, (4) Someone Else and (5) Respondent and Someone Else. The data suggest several key points. First, while joint final say is common in some countries (Turkmenistan, Peru, Colombia, and Rwanda) it is clearly uncommon in others (Nepal and Mali). In addition, within countries, final joint decision-making is more prevalent in some domains (visits to relatives) than others (what food to cook). While these data capture a dimension of joint decision-making, they are limited in being able to show whether individuals contributed to the decision, but did not make the final decision, which is another aspect of joint decision-making. The variables show the end result of the decision-making process but fail to capture the “process” that may be occurring when both partners have input into the decision but the final say is made by one person alone.

Table 2 provides the frequency distributions of female respondents' reports of decision-making patterns based on two data sources: (1) Data from semi-structured interviews (SSI) of 44 married or cohabiting women in Harare, Zimbabwe (Hindin, 1998) and (2) data from 152 married or cohabiting women living in Harare during the 1994 Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Surveys. Both questionnaires had the same wording, which is the wording from the 1994 Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Surveys (ZDHS). The ZDHS included six possible people who could have contributed to the decision (1) Respondent, (2) Husband/Partner, (3) Other Senior Male, (4) Other Senior Female, (5) Other Person and (6) No One. From this list of people, women were asked to mention all people who decided on a particular domain, and then who had the “greatest say” in the decision. In the SSI data, respondents were given the same choices for contributing to the decision, but the data also included a category to describe women who report that the greatest say was a combination of the respondent and partner (or joint greatest say). As compared to the DHS+ response categories, the 1994 ZDHS and the SSIs allow for seeing who contributed to the decision in addition to who had the final say (or greatest say). The most important difference between the SSI and

the DHS was the addition of a fifth category in the SSI—truly joint decisions where the respondent and partner both had input into and made the final say together.

Over a quarter of the sample reported truly joint decisions about major purchases (27%), 5% of the sample reported joint decisions about whether or not the wife works, and 11% reported joint decisions about the number of children. These results illustrate that the omission of just one response category, joint input and joint final say, can influence the responses in the rest of the categories. It is also useful to compare the levels of joint decision-making between the 1994 ZDHS and the 1998 ZDHS. In the 1994 data, while there are no final decisions made jointly, 63% of women reported joint contributions to the decisions of major purchases. In the 1998 ZDHS, 42% of women reported that the final say was made jointly. In general, the percentage of decision-making where the husband and wife contribute but the final say is made by either one is higher (1994 ZDHS) than the percentage of women who report joint final say in the 1998 ZDHS. While truly joint decisions are less common (SSI data), a significant proportion of women reported this pattern, particularly for decisions over major purchases.

Table 3 provides additional evidence of the importance of appropriately capturing joint decision-making. These data come from mother's survey in the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey from Cebu, Philippines (survey methodology described elsewhere (2004; 1991)). The decision-making module for the CLHNS is described in Appendix 3. It should be noted that in the Philippines, women generally play a significant role in decision-making (Hindin & Adair, 2002b; Mason, 1996) The goal of this module was to determine patterns of decision-making and to provide a greater understanding of how couples make joint decisions. Four questions were analyzed for each of the decision making domains: (1) Who contributes to this decision? (2) Whose decision prevails? (3) If a decision required a total of 6 votes, how many votes would each person contributing to the decision have? (e.g. husband and wife with a completely joint decision would have 3 votes each; or husband, wife and mother-in-law would have 2 votes each) and (4) How important is this decision to you? ? (not important, important, very important) This series of decision-making domains are included in Appendix 3. For this analysis, the domains that most closely resembled those asked in the DHS III and DHS+ are used.

The first column of Table 3 shows a replication of the decision-making categories used in the SSIs in Zimbabwe—a five category variable that includes who contributes to the decision and then final say (in this case, whose will prevails). This five category variable is limited to decision-making patterns within married couples where only the husband and/or wife contributed to each decision. (A very small minority report (<1%) others being involved in the decision. However, purchases of major appliances had others involved 9% of the time). The data from this column show several things that are important. First, in a comparison to Zimbabwe, women have substantially more input into decisions and have the final say alone more often (see column 1, Table 2). Second, in decisions related to family planning use and method choice, women are more likely to report “truly joint” decisions or that she alone decides without her spouse's input.

The second column of Table 3 explores a methodology designed to understand how “joint” decisions are among married women in Cebu. Women were asked to describe how many votes each person would get in each decision out of a total of six votes. The analysis presented in column 2 of Table 3 shows the mean number of votes the respondent herself would get in each decision based on the five-category coding of decision-making patterns in the first column of Table 3. In decisions where her husband makes the decisions alone, she would get 0 votes out of 6, and in decisions were she alone decides, she would get all 6 votes out of 6. Not surprisingly, women who report that both she and husband contributed to the decision, and that both of their wills together prevailed, report that women get 3 votes leaving 3 votes for her husband (across all domains the mean is 3.0 and the standard deviation is 0.1). Among women who

report that decisions are made with both of their input, but the final decision is made by the husband, the mean number of votes women get are 2.5 (for decisions about major appliances, her working out side the home, and visiting friends or relatives) and for the family planning decisions, the mean number of votes where both members of the couple have input and the husband's will prevails is 2.7. In contrast, when both members of the couple have input but the wife prevails, she has a higher number of votes, averaging between 3.4 and 3.5. While the voting patterns do not vary substantially across the domains shown, they are instructive for data analysis using decision-making as an independent variable. For much of the survey research that considers decision-making, a five-category variable can be too refined (and lead to small sample sizes). In this setting, based on voting, if one were to condense the five-category variable to a three category variable, the three categories of joint decision-making could be collapsed into one category since the number of votes is most similar. In other settings, the voting may yield similarities between different groups. For example, in setting where men are more dominant, joint decisions where the husband has the final say may reflect his having near total control in contrast to the situation in the Philippines.

The third column of Table 3 shows how important each decision-making domain was to the women respondents in the CLHNS. Women ranked the importance of the decision on a three point scale: 1-Not Important, 2-Important and 3-Very Important. For most of the decisions, women on average thought the decision was important (mean close to 2). Decisions about family planning were considered more important, with an overall mean of 2.6 (data not shown). Although the variation appears small, the means are statistically different (F-test p-value <0.05). There seems to be a pattern whereby women who report having their will prevail (through the decision being made jointly, jointly with her final say, or women alone) also ranks the decision as more important. In comparing the two categories, where the wife has input through her prevailing alone or jointly to where the husband prevails, women consistently rank the decision as being more important if they have input (data not shown, all p-values <0.01).

## **Conclusions**

The goal of this paper was to explore existing decision-making questions to better understand the nature of joint decision-making, which has increasingly become important in both policy and practice for changing demographic outcomes. The paper reveals that in addition to known limitations of using decision-making as a measure of empowerment and/or couple communication, the way joint decision making is categorized can make a substantial difference in the results.

In the most recent DHS, a standardized set of questions focused on women's report of who has the final say in decisions. The key limitation of this type of question is that it doesn't allow for a complete picture of how couples get to the final decisions. It is evident from other data sources that both members of the couple may have input into a decision (albeit unequal input) but may report that one member had the final say. The categories where both have input but the final say is made by the husband or wife can be a significant number of couples, as shown in the 1994 Zimbabwe DHS. In contrast, the 1994 Zimbabwe DHS also has an important limitation. Respondents were asked two questions: who had input into the decisions and who had the final say. However, only one person was allowed to have the final say. This leaves out the category for truly joint decisions (both members of the couple have input and final say). Evidence from semi-structured interviews conducted in Harare suggest that this truly joint category can be substantial and that individuals who made joint decisions would have to arbitrarily pick "who had the final say." (Hindin, 1998)

Additional methods of capturing joint decision-making are explored and reveal that it is optimal to allow for five categories of decision-making: (1) Husband alone, (2) Joint input-husband final say, (3) Joint input-

Joint final say, (4) joint input-wife final say and (5) wife alone. This categorization was useful for understanding the nature of decision-making in both Zimbabwe and Cebu, Philippines. These five categories reveal that while husbands dominate the final say in decisions in Zimbabwe, husbands most often have some input from their wives and also have the final say. Ideally, one could “quantify” the input that wives have, using something like the votes system used in Cebu to gain further understanding of this particular category. For those interested in women’s empowerment, and its role in demographic behavior, it is essential to know whether women have any say in household decisions. In contrast, in Cebu, few decisions are made by the husband alone, but instead, wife alone is the largest category. It is also clear, however, that based on the votes, if one were to compress the decision-making categories from five to three, that all three categories of joint decision-making are similar, with each person getting close to three votes. However, using “final say” as a criterion for compressing categories would be problematic in this setting. For example, even when women in Cebu report that their husbands have the final say in decisions, women have substantial input, based on their number of votes. This may not be true in other settings. The compression of the five-category variable needs to be done with careful consideration of country-specific gender dynamics.

While it would be optimal to implement a more comprehensive set of decision-making questions in household surveys, like those created for the CLHNS, logistical concerns often take precedence (time, cost, interviewee burden). With those constraints in mind, it is still better to ask respondents at least two questions: “Who has input into the decision?” and “Who has the final say?” allowing for truly joint decisions. In addition, the voting patterns reveal more about the nature of joint decisions, and in larger household surveys, a sub-sample of respondents could be asked about voting to provide a more quantitative assessment of relative input into decisions. Despite limitations in using decision-making as a measure of women’s empowerment, or couple communication understanding household decision-making can be important for demographic behaviors and provides a starting point in planning programs and policies,.

Table 1: Percent of Households Decisions with Joint Final Say According to Cohabiting or Married Women in DHS+ Countries

	Own Health Care	Large Purchases	Daily Purchases	Visits to Relatives	Food to Cook
North Africa					
Armenia	39.9	50.2	24.5	64.1	7.5
Egypt	24.8	33.5	19.9	57.9	14.8
Sub-Saharan Africa					
Benin	13.8	15.9	18.3	30.6	13.2
Malawi	7.1	10.8	12.1	44.4	10.9
Mali	5.4	5.8	6.8	10.4	4.1
Rwanda	27.0	32.5	31.8	49.7	14.6
Uganda	17.7	26.5	26.3	31.2	6.0
Zambia	11.0	25.1	--	25.7	--
Zimbabwe	12.5	42.0	20.5	45.1	6.1
Asia					
Turkmenistan	46.4	61.1	31.1	64.2	9.8
Nepal	12.1	17.3	14.6	21.2	8.5
Latin America					
Columbia	21.0	48.9	34.3	51.6	13.7
Haiti	31.1	35.2	31.4	35.9	9.4
Peru	22.8	53.7	30.4	57.0	13.2
Range (%)	5.4 - 46.4	5.8 - 53.7	6.8 - 34.3	10.4 - 64.1	4.1 - 14.8



Table 2: Household Decision-Making based on Qualitative Data and 1994 DHS (Harare, Zimbabwe)

	SSI Data-Harare (n=44) %	1994 DHS Harare n=(152) %	1994 DHS (n=3,701) %
Who makes the decisions over major purchases?			
Husband Alone	0	19.9	17.4
Joint-Husband Final Say	52.3	54.6	45.3
Joint	27.3	--	--
Joint-Wife Final Say	18.2	21.3	17.4
Wife Alone	2.3	4.3	9.8
Who makes the decisions over whether or not the wife works?			
Husband Alone	9.3	30.8	27.1
Joint-Husband	67.4	42.5	39.4
Joint	4.7	--	--
Joint-Wife	7.0	10.3	9.8
Wife Alone	11.6	16.4	16.5
Who makes the decisions over the number of children?			
Husband Alone	15.9	27.3	25.1
Joint-Husband	45.4	57.3	52.7
Joint	11.4	--	--
Joint-Wife	22.7	10.7	11.8
Wife Alone	4.6	4.7	6.3

Table 3: Household Decision-Making Patterns, Number of Votes, and Level of Importance in the 2002 CLHNS

	Percent of Responents (n=2021)	Mean Number of Votes Out of 6 by Respondent (SD), Range 0-6	Mean level of importance of the decision to respondent (SD) Range 1-3
Who makes the decision about buying major appliances?			
Husband Alone	22.8	0 (0.0)	2.0 (0.8)
Joint-Husband Final Say	19.6	2.5 (0.7)	2.3 (0.7)
Joint	17.5	3.0 (0.1)	2.3 (0.6)
Joint-Wife Final Say	11.6	3.5 (0.6)	2.2 (0.7)
Wife Alone	26.4	6 (0.0)	2.2 (0.7)
Who makes the decision if you were to work outside the home?			
Husband Alone	4.8	0 (0.0)	2.2 (0.8)
Joint-Husband	4.4	2.5 (0.8)	2.3 (0.7)
Joint	6.3	3.0 (0.1)	2.4 (0.4)
Joint-Wife	5.3	3.4 (0.6)	2.7 (0.5)
Wife Alone	79.2	6 (0.0)	2.6 (0.6)
Who makes the decision about visiting relatives or friends?			
Husband Alone	11.7	0 (0.0)	2.0 (0.8)
Joint-Husband	8.7	2.5 (0.7)	2.0 (0.7)
Joint	11.2	3.0 (0.1)	2.1 (0.8)
Joint-Wife	10.7	3.4 (0.6)	2.2 (0.7)
Wife Alone	57.7	6 (0.0)	2.1 (0.7)
Who makes the decision about whether to use fp?			
Husband Alone	9.3	0 (0.0)	2.5 (0.7)
Joint-Husband	7.2	2.7 (0.7)	2.6 (0.6)
Joint	21.2	3.0 (0.1)	2.7 (0.6)
Joint-Wife	18.5	3.5 (0.7)	2.7 (0.5)
Wife Alone	43.9	6 (0.0)	2.6 (0.6)
Who makes the decision about what fp method to use?			
Husband Alone	9.9	0 (0.0)	2.5 (0.7)
Joint-Husband	6.6	2.7 (0.6)	2.5 (0.7)
Joint	19.9	3.0 (0.1)	2.7 (0.6)
Joint-Wife	15.0	3.5 (0.7)	2.7 (0.5)
Wife Alone	48.6	6 (0.0)	2.6 (0.6)

Appendix 1: DHS 1994 Round of Data Collection (Zimbabwe)

NO.	QUESTIONS AND FILTERS	CODING CATEGORIES	SKIP
726	<p>Who in your household decides whether to purchase a major household item, such as a radio or television?</p> <p>RECORD ALL MENTIONED</p> <p>THEN ASK: Who has the greatest say in the final decision to make such a purchase?</p>	<p>RESPONDENT.....A  HUSBAND/PARTNER.....B  OTHER SENIOR MALE.....C  OTHER SENIOR FEMALE.....D  OTHER .....E  NO ONE.....F</p> <p>CODE OF PERSON WITH  GREATEST SAY IN DECISION <input type="checkbox"/></p>	
727	<p>Who in your household decides whether you should work outside the home?</p> <p>RECORD ALL MENTIONED</p> <p>THEN ASK: Who has the greatest say in the final decision for you to work outside the home?</p>	<p>RESPONDENT.....A  HUSBAND/PARTNER.....B  OTHER SENIOR MALE.....C  OTHER SENIOR FEMALE.....D  OTHER .....E  NO ONE.....F</p> <p>CODE OF PERSON WITH  GREATEST SAY IN DECISION <input type="checkbox"/></p>	
728	<p>Who decides how many children you will have?</p> <p>RECORD ALL MENTIONED</p> <p>THEN ASK: Who has the greatest say in deciding how many children to have?</p>	<p>RESPONDENT.....A  HUSBAND/PARTNER.....B  OTHER SENIOR MALE.....C  OTHER SENIOR FEMALE.....D  OTHER .....E  NO ONE.....F</p> <p>CODE OF PERSON WITH  GREATEST SAY IN DECISION <input type="checkbox"/></p>	

Appendix 2: DHS 1998 Round of Data Collection

723A	Who in your family usually has the final say on the following decisions:	RESPONDENT = 1 HUSBAND/PARTNER = 2 RESPONDENT & HUSBAND/PARTNER JOINTLY = 3 SOMEONE ELSE = 4 RESPONDENT & SOMEONE ELSE JOINTLY = 5				
	Your own health? .....	1	2	3	4	5
	Large household purchases? .....	1	2	3	4	5
	Daily household purchases? .....	1	2	3	4	5
	Visits to family, friends, or relatives? .....	1	2	3	4	5
	What food should be cooked each day? .....	1	2	3	4	5

**Appendix 3: CLHNS Survey, 2002**

**DECISION MAKING in the 2002 CLHNS**

I would like to know how some decisions in your household are made. I will name some these decisions. If you have never made this type of decision in your household, think about what would happen should this decision come up. For each decision listed, please tell me:

a) Have you/your household ever made this decision?

0 - No

1 - Yes

b) Who contributes (would contribute) to this decision?

1 - Respondent herself

2 - Spouse

3 - Son

4 - Daughter

5 - Father

6 - Mother

7 - Father-in-law

8 - Mother-in-law

9 - Other male relative

10 - Other female relative

11 - Non-household member,  
specify relationship \_\_\_\_\_

-8 - NR

c) If a decision required a total of 6 votes, how many votes would each person contributing to the decision have? (e.g. husband and wife with a completely joint decision would have 3 votes each; or husband, wife and mother-in-law would have 2 votes each).

d) Whose decision prevails/prevailed on this decision?

0 - Joint (specify)

e) IF RESPONDENT'S DECISION DID NOT PREVAIL: Are you usually satisfied with the decision being made?

0 - No

1 - Yes

-9 - Respondent's decision prevailed

f) On a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 not important, 2 important and 3 very important, how important is this decision to you?

Decision: Buying your shoes? Buying clothes for your children? Bringing your child to the doctor? Buying major appliances, e.g. TV? Buying or selling land? Where to send your children for schooling? If you were to work outside the home? If you earn money, how to spend the money you earn? If your spouse earns money, how to spend the money he earns? If you were to visit your parents, relatives, friends outside Cebu? What gift to give your own relatives? Hiring of household help? Whether to use family planning or not? What FP method to use?
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