

An Examination of Decision-making Ability as Source of Empowerment Among the Ijesa Women of Osun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The issue of decision-making ability is paramount to women's empowerment. Studies have assessed the role of women's autonomy in decision-making, and have considered the resources needed to alter or circumvent restrictions on this autonomy at many cultural and institutional levels. Research, policy debate, and action programmes are beginning to recognise the centrality of gender-based power relationships in influencing the decision-making processes among women. This paper examined the decision making ability among the Ijesa women as a source of their empowerment. In other words, this paper examined women's ability to make larger purchases, their involvement in major decisions, relative freedom from domination within the family, women's political and legal awareness, participation in public protests and political campaigns, and their level of economic security as sources of women's empowerment in Ijesaland of southwest Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey design using quantitative technique was employed. A multistage sampling technique, which involved purposive selection of four Local Government Areas (LGAs) with the predominance of the Ijesa was used. A random selection of 17 enumeration areas and 1,594 ever-married women of childbearing age was carried out using a structured questionnaire. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, that is, frequencies and percentages. The findings revealed that out of the six decision making variables considered in the paper, the respondents were found to have low decision making ability on two areas, namely participation in public protest and political campaign and economic security. The paper reveals that ability to make large purchases is the strongest of the sources of women's empowerment. The weakest is participation in public protests and political campaigns. The paper concluded that Ijesa women have relatively high level of decision making ability on issues concerning them, their household, and the society at large.

Keywords: Decision making, women empowerment, Ijesa, Autonomy

Background

The issue of decision-making ability is paramount to women's empowerment. Analysts have begun to examine the interconnections among the exercise of human rights (such as right to work, acquire education, and enjoy freedom of movement), women's perception of their own well-being and self-efficacy, and a broad range of reproductive decisions (Anand, 1994; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994a). Such studies have assessed the role of women's autonomy in decision-making, and have considered the resources needed to alter or circumvent restrictions on this autonomy at many cultural and institutional levels. Research, policy debate, and action programmes are beginning to recognise the centrality of gender-based power relationships in influencing the decision-making processes by which reproduction is determined (Mahmud and Johnson 1994; Nussbaum, 2000; Eguavoen., Odiagbe, and Obetoh, 2007; Upadhyay and Karasek, 2010).

Against this backdrop, gender equality and women's empowerment is one of the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). According to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, women are not just the target of special measures to promote development, they are also the driving force to overcome poverty, reduce hunger, fight illiteracy, heal the sick, prevent the spread of disease and promote stability (UN, 2008).

Empowerment connotes a range of activities from individual self-assertion through collective resistance, protest to mobilisation that challenge basic power relations. For individuals and groups, where class, caste, ethnicity and gender determine their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins when they not only recognise the systemic forces that oppress them, but act to change the existing power relationships. Empowerment, therefore, is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systemic forces which marginalise women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context (Sharma, 1991-1992). Empowerment is thus a process and the result of that process. The goals of women's empowerment are to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality (family); and enable poor women gain access to and control material and informational resources.

In order for women to be empowered, there is the need for women's autonomy. Dyson and Moore (1983) define equality of autonomy between men and women as "equal decision-making ability with regard to personal affairs". Safilios-Rothschild (1982) asserts that the gap between status and autonomy is evident in the fact that, although women may rise to higher status levels either as producers, reproducers of labour, as mother-in-law, or in other social roles, their subordination to men is not necessarily reduced.

However, the definition most relevant to the approach taken in this paper is - Empowerment is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both controls over resources and over ideology... a growing intrinsic capability - greater self-confidence, and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers... (Sen and Batliwala, 2000). Keller and Mbweve (1991) as cited in Rowlands (1995) describe it as "a process whereby women become able to organise themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination".

Also appearing frequently in definitions of empowerment is an element related to the concept of human agency – self-efficacy. Drawing mainly from the human rights and feminist perspectives, many definitions contain the idea that a fundamental shift in perceptions, or "inner transformation", is essential to the formulation of choices. That is, women should be able to define self-interest and choice, and consider themselves as not only able but also entitled to make choices (Chen 1992; Sen 1993; Rowlands 1995; Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000; Kabeer 2001). Kabeer (2001) goes a step further and describes this process in terms of "thinking outside the system" and challenging the status quo.

Similarly, "women's empowerment", "gender equality" and "gender equity" are separate but closely related concepts. The recent policy research report by the World Bank (2001a) employs the term "gender equality", which it defines in terms of equality under the law, equality of opportunity (including equality of rewards for work and equality in access to human capital and other productive resources that enable opportunity), and equality of voice (the ability to influence and contribute to the development process). Gender equality implies "equivalence in life outcomes for women and men, recognising their different needs and interests, and requiring a redistribution of power and resources". Gender equity "recognizes that women and men have different needs, preferences, and interests and that equality of outcomes may necessitate different treatment of men and women" (Reeves and Baden, 2000).

This paper examined the decision making ability among the Ijesa women as a source of their empowerment. In other words, this paper examined women's ability to make larger purchases, their involvement in major decisions, relative freedom from domination within the family, women's political and legal awareness, participation in public protests and political campaigns, and their level of economic security as sources of women's empowerment in Ijesaland of southwest Nigeria. Examining the sources of women's empowerment is important in order to encourage it, and also because women's empowerment has been seen as the panacea for social ills in the society, and a veritable force for female emancipation. Therefore, there is the need to explore the decision-making ability as a source of empowerment among the Ijesa of south-western Nigeria.

A cross-sectional survey design using qualitative and quantitative techniques was employed. A multistage sampling technique, which involved purposive selection of four Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Atakumosa West (346), Ilesa-East (448), Ilesa-West (450) and Obokun (350) with the predominance of the Ijesa was used. A random selection of 17 enumeration areas and 1,594 ever-married women of childbearing age was carried out. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data on socio-demographic characteristics, husband profile, women profile among others. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, that is, frequencies and percentages.

Women's Ability to Make Large Purchases

Women's role in and degree of control over the process of decision-making in households are important aspects of women's empowerment and gender relations with household-level relevance. The choice of specific decisions to investigate was guided by the need to ensure that the decision areas included were relevant to all women, irrespective of current marital status, and whether with children or not, as well as covering different aspects of household and individual functioning.

The ability of women to make large purchases, in part with their own money, as far as household items/ needs are concerned is an indication of empowerment. Respondents were asked whether they purchase items such as pots and pans, children clothing, their own clothing, and families' daily food at least in part with their own money. The responses show that the overwhelming majority of the respondents have ability to make such purchases, at least, in part with their money. With regard to the purchase of pots and pans, 90.3 per cent of the respondents purchased these at least in part with their money, while 86.4 per cent of them purchased children's clothing in part with their money. In terms of purchasing their own clothing with their money, Table 1 shows that about 85 per cent of the respondents do this in part with their money, 74 per cent of the respondents also stated that they support the purchase of the families' daily food in part with their money.

The literature indicates that, when women have the ability to purchase the aforementioned household items at least in part with their money, their level of empowerment is high (Nayak and Mahanta, 2008; Khan and Noreen, 2012). Thus, it could be submitted that the women in the study area are empowered as far as ability to make large purchases are concerned.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of the Respondents by their Ability to Make Large Purchases

Characteristics	N	%
ABILITY TO MAKE LARGER PURCHASES		
Purchase of Pots & Pans at least in Part With Respondents Money	1439	90.3
Purchase of Children's Clothing in Part With Respondents Money	1378	86.4
Purchase of Own Clothing in Part With Respondents Money	1350	84.7
Support of Purchase of Family Daily food in Part With Respondents Money	1177	73.8

Involvement in Major Decisions

Women's participation in decisions being made in their household is widely accepted as a universal indicator of their empowerment (Kishor and Lekha, 2008). Information on the extent of women's empowerment and their involvement in major decisions in the study area was obtained by asking a series of questions on involvement in major decisions. Such decisions as house repair, buying or leasing farmland, buying car/ vehicle/motorcycle, the decision on the number of children to have, when next to have a child, contraceptive method and use and decision on the issues of sexual intercourse.

Table 2 shows that the majority of the respondents (about 70%) indicate that they are always involved in making decisions regarding house repairs. About 51 per cent of these alluded to the fact that they use their money during the process of their house repairs. With regard to the use of respondents' money to lease or buy farmland without seeking husbands' permission, only a little above one-third (34.4%) of the respondents agree that they can use their money to lease or buy farm or land without seeking their husbands' permission.

In line with the above, when respondents were asked whether they can use their money to buy car/vehicle/motorcycle without seeking their husbands' permission, only about one-third of the respondents (32.2%) opined that they can use their money to buy the aforementioned items without first seeking permission of their husbands.

Literature suggests that women's empowerment positively affects their decision on the number of children they will like to have, and that their ability to make such a decision is a sign or measure of empowerment (Kishor and Lekha, 2008). Table 2 shows that 51.6 per cent of the respondents partake in making decisions on the number of children they will like to have. When it comes to making decision on when next the respondents will want to have another child, only about half of the respondents (49.2%) participated in making such a decision. Decisions on which contraceptive methods to use indicates that, 53.6 per cent of the respondents decided on the contraceptive method they want to use. The result also indicates that 49.6 per cent of the respondents are using contraceptives without any complaint from their husbands. This shows that not all who take decisions to use contraceptives are using it without complaints from their husbands. Regarding making requests for sex with husbands, more than half of respondents (56.2%) have requested or asked their husbands for sexual intercourse when they desired it. Those who could make sexual request from their husbands are considered to be empowered. Almost half of the respondents (49.7%) have at one time or the other refused having sex with their husbands when they did not feel like doing it. This is also a sign of empowerment in a society where women are supposed to be submissive to their husbands.

On the average, comparing the women's ability to make decisions on large purchases and their involvement in various decisions, it could be observed from Tables 1 and 2 that the respondents in the study area are more empowered in taking decisions regarding large purchases than they are in getting involved in making major decisions on their household.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of the Respondents by their Involvement in Major Decisions in the Household

INVOLVEMENT IN MAJOR DECISIONS	N	%
Individual or Joint Decision Regarding House Repair	1115	70.0
Own Money Use During the Process	810	50.8
Use Own Money to Lease or Buy Farm/Land Without Seeking Husband Permission	548	34.4
Use Own Money to Buy Car/Vehicle/Motorcycle Without Seeking Husband Permission	514	32.2
Make Decision on Number of Children to Have	823	51.6
Make Decision on When Next to Have a Childs	784	49.2
Make Decision on the Contraceptive Method to Use	854	53.6
Use Contraceptive Without any Complain from Husband	791	49.6
Make Request for Sexual Intercourse with Husband	896	56.2
Refused Having Sex with Husband	743	46.6

Relative Freedom from Domination within the Family

The relative freedom enjoy by women from domination within the family in a patriarchal society is a sign of women's empowerment. To gather information on the relative freedom from domination within the family, respondents were asked four questions: whether husband has taken money from the respondent against her wish within the last few years; whether she had been prevented from visiting her relatives within the last few years; whether she had been able to use her money to help her relatives without her husband's permission; and whether she can take her child to the hospital without her husband's permission.

Table 3 shows that women from the study area enjoy some degree of empowerment given the large number who are able to resist parting with their money against their wish. About one third of the respondents agree that money had been taken from them in the last few years against their wish by husbands. This shows that the majority of the respondents enjoy relative freedom from domination within the family as far as taking their money against their wish is concerned, a good sign of women's empowerment (Mahmud, 1993). The table also shows that 38.8 per cent of the respondents have been prevented from visiting their relatives in the last few years. With respect to respondents who can use their money to help relatives without their husbands' permission, almost half of the respondents (47%) agreed that they can do this, leaving the majority of the respondents in a situation in which they must take permission before using their money to help relatives. It is worthy of note, as could be observed from the table, that not up to half of the respondents (45.5%) can take their children to the hospital without first seeking their husbands' permission.

Table 3: Percentage Distribution of the Respondents by their Relative Freedom from Domination within the Family

Characteristics	N	%
RELATIVE FREDOM FROM DOMINATION WITHIN THE FAMILY		
Money Taken from Respondents in the Last Few Years against Her Wish	536	33.6
Has been Prevented from Visiting Relatives in the Last Few Years	618	38.8
Had Used Money to Help Relatives without Husband Permission	745	46.7
Can Take Child to the Hospital without Husband Permission	726	45.5

Political and Legal Awareness among the Respondents

Another important area in which the level or extent of empowerment can be ascertained is through their political and legal awareness. These may include their knowledge of political activities around them and being aware of some legal implications of actions. Table 4 indicates that the majority of the respondents (76.2%) have knowledge of who their Local Government Chairman is at the time of the survey. A little above half of the respondents (55.3%) were able to mention the name of one member of the Senate or House of Representatives. Generally, therefore, it could be stated that majority of the respondents have political awareness. As far as legal awareness is concerned, majority of the respondents (68.2%) were able to state at least one important reason of registering a marriage. This shows that the majority of the respondents have a fair knowledge of legal awareness. An empowered woman, among other things, should demonstrate a fair understanding of political activities and legal awareness in her surroundings. Table 4 shows that the respondents in the study area could be considered to be empowered in this regard.

Table 4: Percentage Distribution of the Respondents by their Level of Political and Legal Awareness

Characteristics	N	%
POLITICAL & LEGAL AWARENESS		
Knowledge of Local Government Chairman	1214	76.2
Know the Name of a Senator/Member of House of Representatives	882	55.3
Can Tell the Importance of Registering a Marriage	1087	68.2

Participation in Public Protests and Political Campaign

The ability of women to participate in public protests and political campaigns is another indicator of women's empowerment. During the survey, respondents were asked questions relating to their participation in public protests and political campaigns; Table 5 presents the responses on this. From the table, it could be observed that only about one-third of the respondents (29.1%) have ever campaigned for a political party. Information collected from the respondents to ascertain their level of their participation in public protests and political campaigns is whether they have joined others to protest the case of a man beating his wife. Only 4.5 per cent of the respondents have ever joined others to protest on this issue. With regard to whether the respondents have ever joined others in protesting a man divorcing or abandoning his wife, only 7.2 per cent of the respondents agree that they have ever done this. There could be two explanations to the weakness observed in the

respondents' participation in public protests and political campaigns. The first could be that the respondents are generally weak in this aspect of empowerment. Second, it could be that the rate of domestic violence as well as that of divorce is generally low in the study area.

Table 5: Percentage Distribution of the Respondents by their Participation in Public Protests and Political Campaigns

Characteristics	N	%
PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC AND POLITICAL CAMPAIGN		
Ever Campaigned for a Political Party	464	29.1
Ever Joined to Protest a Man Beating His Wife	72	4.5
Ever Joined to Protest a Man Divorcing/ Abandoning His Wife	114	7.2

Level of Economic Security of the Respondents

Economic security is an important aspect of women's empowerment; the extent to which a woman earns and controls income is a good indicator of her level of empowerment. In order to obtain information on the level of economic security of respondents, they were asked what they would do if they have the money to build their own house; open a personal bank account; and have cash savings to run their businesses. The responses ranged from seeking the husbands consent, informing husbands only, informing and obtain husband's consent, to no need to inform or seek husband's consent. Table 6 indicates that regarding decision of the respondents to build their own house if they have the money, the largest percentage of the respondents (64.7%) responded they will inform and obtain their husbands' consent. About 12 per cent would only inform their husbands. At least one in ten respondents (11.5%) indicated they would use their money to build their own houses without seeking their husbands' consent.

Table 6: Percentage Distribution of the Respondents by their Level of Economic Security

Characteristics	N	%
ECONOMIC SECURITY		
Decision if Woman has Money to Build Own House		
Must seek husband's consent	183	11.5
Inform husband only	196	12.3
Inform & obtain husband's consent	1031	64.7
No need to seek husband's consent	184	11.5
Total	1594	100
Decision if Woman has Money to Open Personal Bank Account		
Must seek husband's consent	84	5.3
Inform husband only	291	18.3
Inform & obtain husband's consent	956	60.0
No need to seek husband's consent	263	16.5
Total	1594	100
Decision if Woman has Cash Savings to Run Own Business		
Must seek husband's consent	86	5.4
Inform husband only	295	18.5
Inform & obtain husband's consent	944	59.2
No need to seek husband's consent	269	16.9
Total	1594	100

With regard to what the respondents would do if they have money to open their personal accounts, the same pattern was observed as above, with the largest proportion (60%) maintained that they would inform and obtain the consent of their husbands. It is also noteworthy that 18.3 per cent of the respondents would only inform their husbands of their decision to open personal bank accounts and 17 per cent would need no spousal consent. On respondents' decision of running their business with their cash savings, the same pattern observed above emerged; implying majority would inform and obtain their husbands consent and about 19 per cent and 18 per cent respectively would just inform their husbands or would not seek their consent.

The Table below present the summary of the decision making ability among the Ijesa women of Osun State Nigeria. The Table show that about 91 per cent of the women have ability to make larger purchases, an indication of good decision making ability in this regard. Table 7 also shows that majority of the respondents (over 56 per cent) were also involved in making major that affect their households. It was also found that most of the respondents enjoy relative freedom from domination within the family, which allows them to decide on a

number of issues that affect them and their households. About 70 per cent of the respondents were aware of political and legal issues around them, which could influence their decision making ability positively. Only 6 per cent of the respondents participated in public protests and political campaign, this can have negative effect on their decision making ability. Also, less than 24 per cent of the women were economically secured.

Table 7: Summary Table of Decision-making Ability among Ijesa Women

Ability to Make Larger Purchases	Frequencies	Percentages
Lack Ability	141	8.98
Partial Ability	101	6.43
Full Ability	1329	84.60
Total	1571	100
Involvement in Major Decisions		
Not involved	688	43.79
Partially involved	489	31.13
Fully involved	394	25.08
Total	1571	100
Relative Freedom from Domination within the Family		
Total domination	281	17.90
Partial domination	802	51.08
Egalitarian	487	31.02
Total	1570	100
Political and Legal Awareness		
Not aware	476	30.49
Partially aware	332	21.27
Fully aware	753	48.24
Total	1561	100
Participation in Public Protests and Political Campaign		
Not participated	1305	93.88
Partial participated	62	4.46
Fully participated	23	1.65
Total	1390	100
Economic Security		
Economically insecure	1193	76.28
Partially economically secured	227	14.51
Economically secured	144	9.21
Total	1564	100

Conclusion

Out of the six decision making variables considered in the paper; ability to make large purchases, involvement in major decisions, relative freedom from domination within the family, political and legal awareness, participation in public protests and political campaigns, as well as economic security, the respondents were found to have low decision making ability on two areas, namely participation in public protest and political campaign and economic security. The paper reveals that ability to make large purchases is the strongest of the sources of women's empowerment. The weakest is participation in public protests and political campaigns. In summary, it could be concluded that Ijesa women have relatively high level of decision making ability on issues concerning them, their household, and the society at large.

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