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Economic empowerment and intra-household power

Measuring Intra-household Power and Decision-making: findings and recommendations of a UNECE Task Force

Note by The Task Force on Measuring Intra-household Power and Decision-making*

Abstract

The Task Force on Measuring Intra-household Power and Decision-making was established in response to repeated calls from the gender statistics community for better measurement of internal dynamics within households and recognition that not only resources but also power can be unevenly distributed. The Task Force has been operational since 2017 and will be submitting its final report to the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) in late 2019.

Following reviews of existing practice and identification of gaps; analysis of existing data in selected countries; and examination of methodological and data quality considerations, the Task Force has developed proposals for indicators along seven dimensions of decision-making. Canada has undertaken initial qualitative testing of some suggested survey questions for producing these new indicators.

This paper presents a summary of the work conducted, focusing on the Task Force's conclusions and recommendations.

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NOTE: The designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

I. Background

1. The rationale for establishing the Task Force on Measuring Intra-household Power and Decision-making has previously been presented to UNECE Work Sessions on Gender Statistics, in 2016 and 2017¹.
2. The overarching idea is that the household has for too long been treated in statistics as a unitary locus of decision-making despite widespread evidence in academic research that this assumption is flawed. Furthermore, statistical indicators produced under the heading ‘decision-making’ almost exclusively pertain to the public sphere of life, while many decisions are taken within the private sphere. While no specific indicators on this topic have been included in the list of indicators for measuring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), targets 5.4 and 5.5 of the SDGs call for the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family and for full and effective participation at all levels of decision-making.
3. Based on this rationale, the Steering Group on Gender Statistics developed terms of reference for the present Task Force² which were presented to the Bureau of the CES in February 2017. The mandate of the Task Force has been extended until October 2019 to permit incorporation of findings from qualitative testing conducted in early 2019 in Canada.
4. The objective of the Task Force is to make an inventory of indicators and sources and provide recommendations to statistical offices on measuring the gendered dimensions of intra-household power and decision-making.
5. The terms of reference call for the Task Force to
 - i. Compile an inventory of existing indicators, including information about the statistical surveys in which they are included;
 - ii. Evaluate the existing indicators in terms of conceptual validity, coverage, frequency, quality and standardization across sources and UNECE countries;
 - iii. Identify aspects of the topic for which there are currently no adequate indicators;
 - iv. Make proposals for methodological work to fill gaps where indicators do not exist or are poorly defined or where data availability is limited: such as by developing and testing new survey questions, or by conducting research to investigate how better to pose questions to collect valid data;
 - v. Define headline and supporting indicators;
 - vi. Evaluate the prospect of the production of these indicators as official statistics;
 - vii. Analyze intra-household power and decision-making in selected countries, using available indicators;
 - viii. Draft recommendations for statistical offices based on findings from the above activities.

¹ See Working Paper 19 of the 2016 Work Session at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=41270> and Working Paper 22 of the 2017 Work Session at <http://www.unece.org/index.php?id=45133>, respectively.

² Available as document ECE/CES/BUR/2017/FEB/11/Rev.1 at <http://www.unece.org/statistics/networks-of-experts/task-force-on-measuring-intra-household-power-and-decision-making.html>

6. As many as 30 individuals representing 19 countries or organizations are or have been members of the Task Force. Core tasks have been led by representatives from Canada, Italy, Lithuania and Mexico. Many others have contributed information about existing practices in their countries. The Task Force is chaired by Pierre Turcotte, Department for Women and Gender Equality, Canada.

II. Main work strands of the Task Force

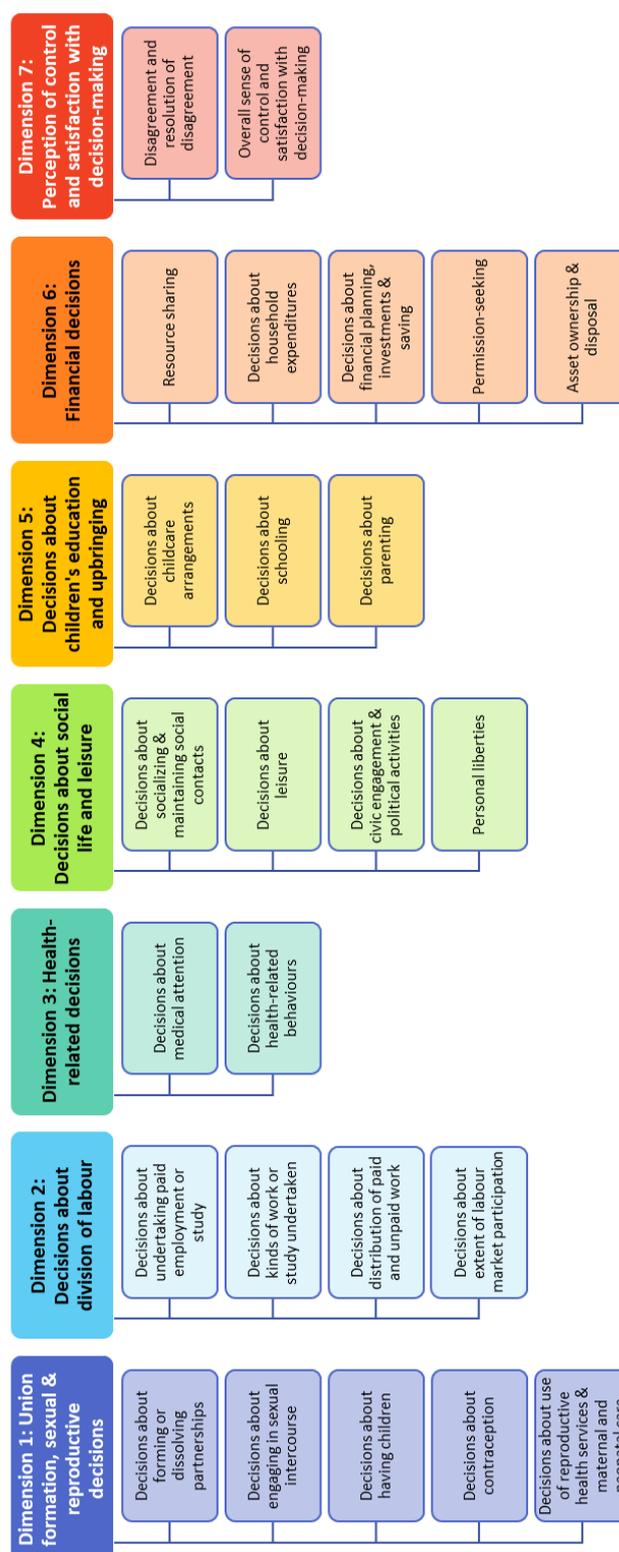
7. Guided by the activities identified in the terms of reference, the Task Force developed a work plan based on five strands:
 - i. Information gathering: countries which are represented on the Task Force initially provided information about their current practices (relevant surveys conducted, questions and response options included in those surveys, indicator production, dissemination activities, research, testing and analysis, challenges faced). Following a broader invitation to provide information using an online survey, other countries beyond the Task Force added to this body of information on current practice.
 - ii. Assessing data quality and methodological considerations: based both on the information provided by countries and on an extensive literature review, the Task Force has analyzed the main challenges faced in collecting data and producing statistics on this topic. It has identified some key methodological challenges and suggestions for best practice.
 - iii. Reviewing existing research and practice: the Task Force recognized that while this topic is relatively new to the field of official statistics, especially in the ECE region, there is a long history of research using decision-making questions in the field of development and related areas. Furthermore there are some major international survey programmes which have included decision-making questions. The Task Force has therefore summarized the intra-household decision-making content of international survey programmes and of some of the main fields in the academic literature. This strand of work has looked at agricultural surveys and censuses; Demographic and Health Surveys and reproductive health surveys; nutrition and development programmes; the Generations and Gender Surveys; the EU-SILC 2010 ad-hoc module on intra-household sharing of resources; the International and European Social Survey Programmes; Living standards Measurement Surveys; and Multiple Indicator Cluster surveys.
 - iv. Test analyses of existing datasets: recognizing that many countries are already facing challenges to meet existing data collection demands placed on them, the Task Force wished to investigate the extent to which intra-household power and decision-making could be analyzed with existing data in selected countries, without proposing new surveys, new modules or even new questions to countries. Selected countries performed analyses of their existing datasets, plus analyses were performed on data from the Generations and Gender Surveys, to see how well currently-available datasets in selected countries permit meaningful, policy-relevant analysis of intra-household decision-making. The analyses are not intended as fully comprehensive analyses of all available data from any given country, nor of data from all countries that produce any relevant data (indeed, there are many countries for which a small amount of analysis could be conducted, while there are relatively few offering the prospect of a detailed analysis). Rather this strand of work is meant to be indicative of what is possible and where there are limitations.

- v. Developing a set of proposed indicators: the Task Force was mandated to suggest headline and supporting indicators. Through two intensive face-to-face meetings of a core group of Task Force members, a set of indicators has been developed along with some suggestions as to possible survey questions that could be used to produce those indicators. Section III below gives more detail about this strand of work.
8. A final report of the Task Force, *Recommendations for Measuring Intra-household Power and Decision-making* is in preparation and will be submitted by the Task Force to the Bureau of the conference of European Statisticians in October this year.

III. Dimensions of decision-making

9. The concepts of power and decision-making are broad and encompass a variety of different conceptual areas. The Task Force termed these areas ‘dimensions’. The reviews of both current practices and of literature permitted the Task force to distil seven distinct dimensions.
10. The group does not argue that these seven encompass all possible areas in which intra-household decisions can be made. Discussions in international forums with participants from diverse regions of the world made clear that there are other areas in which decisions may be made—for example, decisions about migration and where a household lives; decisions about agricultural activity; decisions about resource use, etc. However, the seven dimensions identified here were considered to be of relevance to the countries of the UNECE region and beyond, whereas areas such as agriculture may be of limited relevance to many countries in the region.
11. The dimensions are assumed to be conceptually distinct and practically independent, meaning that it would in theory be possible for a person to have the power to take decisions, as the sole, main or joint decision-maker, in any given dimension without it necessarily following that they must also be the sole, main or joint decision-maker in any other dimension. This assumption has not been tested, however, as this was not practically possible within the framework of the current Task Force. An important recommendation for future work is therefore that the conceptual distinctiveness of the dimensions would need to be tested. This would be valuable both on theoretical grounds and on practical grounds, as it would allow surveys to keep to a minimum the number of different items that need to be included to obtain a complete picture of the phenomenon.
12. For each dimension, a proposal is made in the full report of this Task Force for a set of indicators. These are given under two headings: core indicators and supporting indicators. The core indicators are those considered by the Task Force to be the most conceptually central to the dimension under consideration, but also the most feasible in terms of production. That is, the Task Force has attempted not to propose core indicators that would be particularly challenging to produce, even if they consider them as conceptually important.
13. Figure 1 below shows the seven dimensions and the sub-dimensions contained within each:

Figure 1: Dimensions and sub-dimensions of intra-household decision-making



14. The final report of the Task Force gives a detailed rationale for each of these dimensions, in terms of what it means and how it would be relevant for policymaking. The Task Force

emphasizes that in a great many cases there are few or no existing sources to refer to for appropriate survey questions and very few existing indicators are published by countries. Therefore, the overriding recommendation arising from this strand of work is that extensive qualitative testing is needed.

15. As a first step towards this, Canada (Statistics Canada, for the Canada Department for Women and Gender Quality) conducted some initial testing in January and February 2019. The findings of these tests are incorporated into the final report of the Task Force.
16. This qualitative testing (one-on-one interviews) was performed on selected questions associated with three dimensions of household power and decision-making: Union formation, sexual and reproductive decisions; Decisions about division of labour; and Financial decisions. The main objectives were to test the cognitive processes of respondents in answering the questions and their ability and willingness to respond to potential survey questions.
17. The results suggest that most respondents would be willing and able to answer these ‘perception’ questions. No major issues in terms of understanding or answering were found and questions were deemed to be interesting and relevant. Some forms of wording were preferred over others, and some questions gave rise to very little variation in responses, suggesting that that would be of limited value.
18. Survey context is important (i.e. the nature of the survey – in this case a family history survey) and the tested questions need to be asked in combination with more ‘factual’ context-setting questions (e.g. asking about the type of child care arrangements used by a family before asking about how a decision was made about the type of child care).

IV. Main conclusions and recommendations

19. The full set of conclusions and recommendations of the Task Force, including a wide-ranging set of proposals for further work, will be contained in the final report to be submitted to the CES. However, the observations below present an overview of the major points:

A. Overarching recommendations

20. Existing, commonly-used questions on intra-household decision-making may not be sufficiently nuanced or well understood by respondents to be freely re-used in all circumstances. Countries wishing to produce more comprehensive information on the topic therefore must recognize that power and decision-making are complex. There are many kinds of decisions taken within a household, covering many dimensions and carrying different weights in terms of the impacts on the household and its members; and the modalities of reaching each kind of decision cannot be assumed to all be the same. In particular, some kinds of decisions may be taken from a position of power whereas the duty to be the main decision-maker in other arenas could be a reflection of a lack of power. As such, the Task Force recommends that
 - i. The common survey questions used in multi-topic household surveys in developing country settings should not be applied to other settings without adaptation
 - ii. Simple indices of decision-making based on combining all decision-making domains in a survey, with equal weight, should be avoided as they mask the unequal weights of different kinds of decisions in real experience, as well as the possible

opposing forces of implementation and orchestration power (rights versus duties to make certain kinds of decisions).

21. In many cases, no specific question wording or response categories can be put forward as the ‘ideal’ formulation—but perceived best practices and qualitative testing conducted so far has given rise to some general approaches as well as some terms to avoid (such as using the words ‘power’ or ‘authority’ in survey questions)
22. Countries must note that the interpretation and acceptability of different question wording is likely to vary across countries due to cultural differences. Nevertheless, international comparability should be one of the aims in producing indicators on this topic, and as such countries are encouraged to use broadly similar formulations to aid cross-country comparisons. The same applies within countries, across surveys, where the use of similar phrasing would permit the comparison of indicators deriving from a variety of data sources.
23. The likelihood of cross-country differences must also be taken into consideration in deciding which indicators are relevant to a given country. The broad variety of cultural contexts in the UNECE region means that indicators dealing with childcare arrangements, health care provision, division of paid labour, personal liberties, and many more, will have different meaning and relevance in different countries, and in some cases it would be inappropriate to produce them or they would need modification to the context.
24. It is necessary for data producers to accept and embrace the inherent subjectivity of this topic, and in so doing to recognize that incongruent responses (from partners where both are interviewed, or across all respondents when asked whether they or their partner take decisions), do not indicate that questions are eliciting ‘wrong’ responses or being misunderstood. Since power itself is subjectively felt, it is people’s *subjective feeling* about whether or not they can take decisions that is important for measuring such power, more than any ‘objective’ measure of whether they really are able to do so. The potential of such subjective questions to add value to existing ‘objective’ indicators should be recognized, and as such they should be incorporated into more traditional surveys which otherwise collect objective ‘facts’. In combination, they will produce richer data for more nuanced analysis.

B. Methodological recommendations

25. The ideal scenario is to interview both partners in a couple. Where measurement of intra-household power and decision-making is one of the principal objectives of a study, this is recommended as the ‘gold standard’. Nevertheless the Task Force recognizes the limitations that make this unlikely in many cases.
26. The purposes of the investigation will determine the most appropriate survey vehicle into which decision-making questions should be incorporated in any given instance. Unless a full survey is to be conducted specifically devoted to the measurement of intra-household power and decision-making, it is likely that some questions would fit best into certain kinds of surveys and others into other kinds of surveys. When this happens, attention must be paid to the differences between surveys that may limit comparability of indicators produced from different sources.
27. Just as different surveys may be the best fit for different indicators, different approaches to sampling and to the population of interest may be appropriate depending on the nature of any given investigation. Sampled populations could be nationally-representative, but the measurement of intra-household power and decision-making could also be of particular

interest for minority or vulnerable groups, permitting the study of intersectionality and multiple disadvantage.

28. Recognizing that few if any countries would endeavour to produce all of the proposed indicators, the Task Force argues that a complete picture of the phenomenon of intra-household power requires indicators from each of the seven dimensions.
29. Furthermore, it is recommended that the core indicators take priority, with supporting indicators being added to these if a fuller analysis is desired.
30. Noting that several countries already include relevant survey questions in surveys but that few produce and publish indicators based on them, the Task Force recommends that countries pay particular attention to dissemination and communication. This could take many forms, ranging from simple publication of indicators on decision-making to compilations of related indicators, analytical work or graphics and visual displays. This could in turn generate user interest and help to guide NSOs in refining their decision-making indicators to better meet user needs.

C. Further work

31. The work conducted by the Task Force has demonstrated that the measurement of intra-household power and decision-making is in its infancy, and much remains to be done before it can be considered a well-developed area with clear concepts, robust methods and harmonized, comparable indicators. Further work in each of the following areas would help to develop the topic:
 - i. Qualitative testing: to test survey questions, response options, question order, etc, in various countries and survey types.
 - ii. Validity testing: to investigate how far the proposed indicators can explain policy-relevant outcomes.
 - iii. Data reduction: to reduce the proposed set of dimensions, sub-dimensions and indicators to a more parsimonious set.
 - iv. Continuation of international collaboration: to share the results of qualitative testing and data analysis.
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