

**Women and Decision Making in the Home: Findings from a
National Study in Malaysia**

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Women and Decision Making in the Home: Findings from a National Study in Malaysia

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Introduction

Women's contributions towards the social and economic development of the nations have been well recognized worldwide. There has been substantial increase in the proportion of women attaining higher educational levels, participating in labour force and occupying in managerial and decision making positions. In many countries including Malaysia, supportive legislation were introduced, reviewed and amended over the last decade to include 'gender' as one of the prohibitive grounds for discrimination. However, not much is known about women's involvement in decision making in the home front especially among cohabiting couples.

Earlier research on women's involvement in domestic decision making concentrated on family health related issues (Mahmood, 2002; Mussawar, 2003; Furuta and Salway, 2006; Fantahun, Berhane, Wall, Byass and Hogberg, 2007) while Dobbelsteen and Kooreman (1997) and Bernasek and Bajtelsmit (2002) attempted to measure the degree of women's involvement in household financial decision making. For example, the study by Bernasek and Bajtelsmit (2002) found significant positive relationship between women's involvement in household finances and their share of the total household income based on a sample of investment data of one university employees who were cohabiting at the time of the survey. Other studies focused on women's say in a combination of decision making in weekend activities, TV choices and big-ticket purchase (George, 2008).

This paper examines the extent of women's involvement in decision making on the home front using data from a nationwide survey carried out in Malaysia in 2005 involving married women aged 25 to 59 years. Involvement of women with regard to decisions made on family related matters including purchase of assets, household expenditure, social activities and education of children are presented. Of particular interest is the extent of collective decision made by women and their spouses made on these decision making situations. The paper also examines the variations of women's decision making involvement across selected demographic and socio-economic characteristics.

Methodology and Data

Data for the study were obtained through personal interviews using structured questionnaire on a sample of currently married women in 11 states in Malaysia. The sample was selected based on a multi-stage sampling procedure where the first stage involved stratification by urban-rural setting in each state, followed by selection of districts and villages/residential areas. A convenience sample of respondents was then interviewed depending on the presence of married women aged 25 to 59 years in the household of selected villages/residential areas. A total of 1453 married women were successfully interviewed and their profiles are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Married Women Respondents in Malaysia

Respondents	Number	Percentage (%)
Age		
25-34 years	459	31.6
35-44	556	38.3
45-59	438	30.1
Place of residence		
Urban	896	61.7
Rural	557	38.3
Ethnicity		
Malay	1236	85.0
Chinese	129	9.0
Indian	77	5.0
Others	11	1.0
Education		
Primary/religious/no formal schooling	330	22.7
Secondary education	837	57.6
College/University	286	19.7
Employment Status		
Working	585	40.3
Not Working	868	59.7
Total	1453	100.0

The respondents are symmetrically distributed in terms of age with mean, median and mode of 40 years. The proportion of women by place of residence represents the distribution of the urban and rural population of the country (60% and 40%, respectively) while the distribution by ethnic group seems to be heavily skewed towards the Malays although Chinese and Indians comprise 35 percent and 10 percent of the total population, respectively. Majority of the respondents have at least secondary education and are not working.

Decision making situations

Purchase of assets and family matters

The respondents were asked questions on who makes the decision with regard to purchase of assets and properties and the results are shown in Table 2. The category response 'Others' refers to where decisions made involved parents, other members of the family or friends.

Table 2: Decisions on Purchase of Assets and Family Matters (Percentage)

Purchase of	Decision made by			
	Woman	Husband	Both	Others
Land	3.2	21.9	74.7	0.2
House	3.0	22.4	74.4	0.1
Car	3.0	24.6	72.2	0.2
Household expenditure	30.4	12.8	56.6	0.2
Social activities	7.6	14.2	78.1	0.1
Children's education	5.5	13.0	81.2	0.3

As can be seen from Table 2, the highest proportion of women involved in joint decision making relates to children's education (81%) while the lowest is on household expenditure (57%). Joint decision on purchase of assets varies between 72 percent on purchase of car to 75 percent on purchase of land.

Tables 3 through 8 present the percentage distributions of the decisions made with respect to the purchase of assets and family matters across the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. The p-values shown in the last column refer to the significance of the Pearson chi-square tests of independence between the four categories of decision making types and the respective categories of the selected background variables.

Table 3: Decision Made on Purchase of Land by Selected Variables

Background variable	Woman	Husband	Both	Others	p-value
<i>Place of Residence</i>					
Urban	3.0	20.0	77.0	0.0	0.07
Rural	3.6	24.7	71.3	0.4	
<i>Employment Status</i>					
Working	4.1	13.6	81.8	0.5	0.00
Not Working	2.6	27.2	70.1		
<i>Ethnicity</i>					
Malay	3.2	20.5	76.0	0.2	0.188
Chinese	1.9	29.1	68.9	0.0	
Indian & Others	4.9	31.1	63.9	0.0	
<i>Education</i>					
No formal/religious/primary	3.3	28.9	67.4	0.4	0.001
Secondary	3.5	22.3	74.0	0.2	
University/college	2.2	12.3	85.5	0.0	
<i>Age</i>					
25-34	3.5	19.0	77.6	0.0	0.005
35-44	2.6	18.9	78.5	0.0	
45-59	3.7	28.2	67.5	0.6	

The results in Table 3 indicate that with the exception of ethnicity and place of residence, there are significant differences (5% significance level) between who makes the decision in buying land and employment status, educational attainment and age of the woman. The proportion of decision made by both partners is higher among urban, Malay, working, college educated and younger aged women compared with their respective counterparts. It is interesting to note that proportion of decision made by both partners is higher among urban compared to rural women the reverse is true of the proportion of women who made this decision by themselves. Similarly, the proportion of women who made their own decision to buy land is higher among those with no tertiary education even though the proportion of decisions made by both parties increases significantly with increasing educational attainment.

Table 4: Decision Made on Purchase of House by Selected Variables

Background Variable	Woman	Husband	Both	Others	p-value
<i>Region</i>					
urban	2.8	19.2	78.0	0.0	0.00
rural	3.4	27.9	68.3	0.4	
<i>Work Status</i>					
Working	3.5	13.6	82.6	0.4	0.00
Not Working	2.7	28.4	68.8	0.0	
<i>Ethnicity</i>					
Malays	3.0	21.3	75.5	0.2	0.308
Chinese	2.4	26.6	71.0	0.0	
Indians & Others	4.9	30.9	64.2	0.0	
<i>Education</i>					
no formal/religious/primary education	3.6	31.5	64.6	0.3	0.000
Secondary	3.0	22.7	74.2	0.1	
University/college	2.6	11.7	85.8	0.0	
<i>Age</i>					
25-34	2.4	19.4	78.2	0	0.027
35-44	3.1	21.1	75.8	0	
45-59	3.6	27.1	68.8	0.5	

Similar results are observed concerning decision made by both the women and their husbands on purchase of house. All but one demographic variable (ethnicity) suggest significant association between the type of decision made and the various categories of the selected characteristics of the women. Older women, those in the rural areas and without tertiary education show higher proportion of decisions made alone by themselves with respect to buying house (Table 4).

Table 5: Decision Made on Purchase of Car by Selected Variables

Background Variable	Woman	Husband	Both	Others	p-value
<i>Region</i>					
urban	3.0	22.5	74.5	0.0	0.021
rural	2.9	28.5	68.2	0.4	
<i>Work Status</i>					
Working	3.6	17.8	78.2	0.4	0.00
Not Working	2.5	29.5	68.0	0.0	
<i>Ethnicity</i>					
Malays	2.9	23.0	74.0	0.2	0.014
Chinese	3.2	29.8	66.9	0.0	
Indians & Others	4.0	41.3	54.7	0.0	
<i>Education</i>					
no formal/religious/primary education	2.8	31.6	65.2	0.4	0.006
Secondary	2.6	24.7	72.6	0.1	
University/college	4.3	17.4	78.3	0.0	
<i>Age</i>					
25-34	3.5	21.5	75.0	0.0	0.008
35-44	2.5	22.6	74.9	0.0	
45-59	3.0	30.7	65.7	0.5	

Decision making on buying a car is presented in Table 5 indicating significant association between who makes the decision and the women's characteristics. Expectedly the proportion of women who report that the decision to buy a car is made by both the women and their husbands is higher among the urban and working women and while this proportion increases with increasing level of education it decreases with increasing age of the women. In terms of ethnic variation, Table 5 shows that the decision made by both is highest among the Malays followed by Chinese and Indians.

Table 6: Decision Made on Household Expenditure by Selected Variables

Background Variable	Woman	Husband	Both	Others	p-value
<i>Region</i>					
urban	31.8	10.9	57.1	0.2	0.044
rural	28.3	15.9	55.7	0.2	
<i>Work Status</i>					
Working	28.1	9.5	62.1	0.3	0.012
Not Working	32.0	15.0	52.8	0.1	
<i>Ethnicity</i>					
Malays	29.7	12.3	57.7	0.2	0.385
Chinese	37.5	14.8	47.7	0.0	
Indians & Others	29.9	16.1	54.0	0.0	
<i>Education</i>					
no formal/religious/primary education	33.2	14.3	52.4	0.0	0.312
Secondary	29.4	13.3	57.0	0.2	
University/college	30.1	9.4	60.1	0.3	
<i>Age</i>					
25-34	27.7	11.2	61.1	0.0	0.007
35-44	29.3	12.2	58.5	0.0	
45-59	34.7	15.2	49.4	0.7	

Household expenditure registers a much higher proportion of women making their own decision ranging from 28 percent among rural and working women to 38 percent among Chinese while the proportion of decision made by both parties ranges from 48 percent among Chinese to 62 percent among working women. Significant relationships are observed across place of residence, work status and age (Table 6).

Table 7: Decision Made on Social Activities by Selected Variables

Demographic Variable	Me	Husband	Both	Others	p-value
<i>Region</i>					
urban	8.4	11.1	80.5	0.0	0.000
rural	6.3	19.1	74.3	0.4	
<i>Work Status</i>					
Working	6.8	9.9	83.2	0.2	0.010
Not Working	8.1	17.1	74.6	0.1	
<i>Ethnicity</i>					
Malays	7.7	13.7	78.4	0.2	0.827
Chinese	7.0	14.8	78.1	0.0	
Indians & Others	7.0	19.8	73.3	0.0	
<i>Education</i>					
no formal/religious/primary education	6.6	17.4	75.6	0.3	0.111
Secondary	7.9	14.7	77.3	0.1	
University/college	7.7	9.2	83.1	0.0	
<i>Age</i>					
25-34	7.5	12.8	79.6	0.0	0.143
35-44	7.8	12.9	79.2	0.0	
45-59	7.3	17.3	74.9	0.5	

In terms of social activities although the proportion of joint decisions increases with increasing level of education and decreases with increasing age of the women, the associations are not statistically significant. There is also no significant difference between who made the decision on social activities across the three ethnic groups while significant associations are observed with respect to place of residence and work status of the women (Table 7).

Table 8: Decision Made on Children's Education by Selected Variables

Demographic Variable	Woman	Husband	Both	Others	p-value
<i>Region</i>					
urban	6.0	11.2	82.5	0.2	0.827
rural	4.6	15.7	79.3	0.4	
<i>Work Status</i>					
Working	6.5	8.1	84.9	0.5	0.00
Not Working	4.8	16.2	78.9	0.1	
<i>Ethnicity</i>					
Malays	5.1	12.9	81.7	0.3	0.696
Chinese	7.3	12.2	80.5	0.0	
Indians & Others	8.3	15.5	76.2	0.0	
<i>Education</i>					
no formal/religious/primary education	5.2	15.4	79.3	0.0	0.096
Secondary	4.8	13.5	81.3	0.4	
University/college	7.7	8.4	83.5	0.4	
<i>Age</i>					
25-34	5.6	12.1	82.4	0.0	0.553
35-44	5.3	12.8	81.7	0.2	
45-59	5.5	14.1	79.7	0.7	

Table 8 shows that the proportion of women who reported getting involved in joint decision making on matters related to children's education is very high ranging from 76 percent among Indian women to 85 percent among working women. The differences in these proportions are not statistically across region, ethnic group, educational attainment and age of the women. The only significant association is observed between who made the decision and the work status of the women.

Discussion

A high proportion of joint decision made on several domestic aspects of the households among married couples provides a reasonably good indication of the recognition of the importance of women's involvement in the home front. This study suggests that involvement of Malaysian women in household decision making especially on matters requiring financial commitment is enhanced by educational attainment and work status which could be used as proxy for independent source of income. Evidence from this study reveals that younger women are more likely to participate in domestic decision making than older women which could be due to the improved educational and employment in higher income generation sectors.

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