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Measuring Women's Agency: New MAGNET Tools for Research and Policy

Improving women's agency—their ability to set goals and act on them—is crucial for advancing gender equality and economic development. Yet agency is hard to measure well. Existing measures tend to have a narrow focus, capturing it indirectly through proxies or downstream outcomes, and are frequently not validated in lower-income country contexts or adapted to the realities of women's lives in these settings. This results in a fragmented understanding of development constraints and outcomes. The MAGNET initiative was set up to close this gap, developing measures of agency that are more direct, more rigorous, and usable across contexts. This brief presents 24 new tools for measuring agency across three key dimensions, developed and tested across 76 rounds of data collection in 18 countries: (i) ownership and control of assets, (ii) goal-setting and decision-making and (iii) sense of control and efficacy.¹

About MAGNET

The Measures for Advancing Gender Equality (MAGNET) initiative is a collaboration between the World Bank's Africa Gender Innovation Lab (AFRIGIL) and Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) teams, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and researchers at Oxford University, KIT Institute, Makerere University, the Asian Development Bank, The Brookings Institution, Tufts University, and CUNEF University. The initiative is funded by the Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality (UFGE) in partnership with the Gates Foundation.

MAGNET brings together internationally renowned researchers across disciplines: Aletheia Donald (World Bank), Maria Hernandez de Benito (CUNEF University), Caren Grown (Brookings), Cheryl Doss (Tufts), Clare Clingain (IRC), Hazel Malapit (IFPRI), Heather Moylan (World Bank), Hema Swaminathan (Asian Development Bank), Losira Nasirumbi Sanya (Makerere University), Marya Hillesland (KIT Institute), and Christian David Castaño Bonilla (World Bank).

¹ All tools presented here have been tested against MAGNET's validation criteria, including construct validity, internal reliability, structural validity, and respondent understanding across multiple contexts, as explained on our methodology page. Each tool's page indicates whether the tool can be used off the shelf, where respondent understanding needs to be probed during piloting, and how best to analyze the resulting data. Tool pages, statistical annexes, and CAPI files are available at <https://magnet.ifpri.info>.

CONTROL OVER ASSETS

Gender gaps in the ownership and control of land, housing, and financial assets remain widespread. Strengthening women's property rights can yield wide-ranging benefits—from greater bargaining power and lower rates of domestic violence to improved child nutrition, higher human capital investment, and more productive land use. Designing effective policies to close these gaps, however, depends on having the right measurement tools to identify who actually controls and benefits from a given asset. The tools in this theme capture **beliefs** about what ownership means, the **benefits** that control over assets confers, and how enumerators' own **attitudes** shape what respondents report.

BELIEFS

INSIGHT

Ownership is multidimensional

Ownership questions mean different things to different respondents, and to the same respondent across different assets. Two people can give the same answer about who owns something and disagree entirely about what the owner can do with it. Measuring ownership therefore requires establishing what the term means in context before survey answers can be compared.

Understanding the Meaning of Ownership

The concept of ownership carries different legal, social, and practical meanings across contexts; differences that introduce ambiguity into standard asset surveys. These vignettes probe how respondents conceptualize ownership, enabling researchers to identify measurement ambiguity and correct for it before drawing conclusions about asset rights. For instance, even when a woman buys an asset with her own money, respondents commonly say she still needs a husband's or father's permission to sell or give it away.

Preferences over Joint vs. Individual Asset Rights

Is individual ownership of assets better than joint ownership? There is often an implicit assumption that the former is more empowering. This tool tests that assumption by asking men and women whether a woman in a vignette would be better off holding assets jointly with

*Latifa, the owner-caretaker
of her family's 20-acre farm*



her husband or individually, with the individual-ownership alternative varying across scenarios in both size and how equally it splits the joint total between spouses. Across pilot countries and asset classes, most respondents (men and women alike) say a wife would prefer joint ownership than to own half as much individually, though the strength of this relationship varies with context, asset type, and the specific alternative offered.

Rights when Land is Owned Jointly

When land is registered jointly, aggregate ownership figures do not reveal which household members have any say over the use of the land. This tool measures perceptions of control rights over jointly held land in respondents' communities, providing a clearer picture of how joint land rights are understood in practice. Most respondents say neither spouse can sell jointly owned land without the other's agreement, but that consensus weakens when the land was inherited by one spouse rather than jointly purchased.

SAMPLE ITEM – Vignette

“Peter and Grace are married. They own a plot of agricultural land together, that they purchased after they were married. Which situation is most common in your community?”

- A. Neither can sell the land without the other’s agreement.
- B. Peter can sell the land on his own, regardless of what Grace wants. Grace cannot sell the land.
- C. Grace can sell the land on her own, regardless of what Peter wants. Peter cannot sell the land.
- D. Either can sell the land without the other’s agreement.”

Repeated for two additional scenarios: Grace inherited the plot; Peter inherited the plot.

After each scenario, respondents are asked: Does this scenario resemble households in your community?

After reading out all of the scenarios, the respondents are asked: Which scenario resembles households in your community most?

INSIGHT

“Joint ownership” can have multiple meanings

The reality of joint ownership is more complex than the label might signify, as rights conferred by a joint title are not always equal. Who has the actual decision-making power over the use of the asset depends on how it was acquired—whether it was inherited, gifted, or purchased together.

BENEFITS

Asset Rights Upon Marriage Dissolution

A woman’s property rights are often only as secure as her marriage. This survey module captures what respondents expect to happen to ownership and control after separation, by asset type and mode of acquisition, capturing key dimensions of tenure security. In India, only 30% of respondents said that land would go to both spouses when the husband purchased the land; this increased to 70% when the wife’s unpaid household work was explicitly noted.

Asset Control and Benefits Scale

Ownership does not guarantee control over how an asset is used or who benefits from it. This scale measures the degree of practical control a respondent has over assets and the benefits they derive from them, providing a disaggregated picture of effective ownership rights. Men and women report similar ability to use the same assets, but diverge sharply on who controls the economic benefits and decisions about the asset’s future.

ATTITUDES

INSIGHT

The interviewer is part of the data

Who conducts the interview shapes what respondents report: enumerators with more conservative gender views elicit more conservative responses. If these views are measured in advance, they can be accounted for in enumerator assignment and analysis, or potentially addressed through training.

Enumerator Characteristics and Reporting Bias

Survey responses on sensitive topics like asset ownership and decision-making are known to vary with interview context. Administered to enumerators before training, this module identifies which enumerator characteristics, such as gender, age, and beliefs about women’s rights, shape respondents’ reporting, and whether effects differ by respondent gender or context. Among the enumerator characteristics tested, gender attitudes matter most; enumerators with more conservative views elicit more conservative responses across asset ownership, land usage, decision-making power, and gender attitudes. Enumerator sex affects some responses, while other socio-demographic characteristics do not appear to matter.

GOAL-SETTING AND DECISION-MAKING

Women's participation in household decisions has been linked to greater investment in children and in women's own wellbeing. Participation varies enormously across contexts, from roughly one woman in ten in Senegal and Mali to two in three in Kenya and three in four in India. But knowing who participates omits what a woman's own goals are, whether she wanted to be involved, how her preferences were shaped, and what it cost her to take part in decisions. The tools in this theme capture women's **preferences** over who decides, the **process** through which decisions are reached, and the **price** women pay for exerting control.

PREFERENCE

INSIGHT

Non-involvement in decision-making is not always exclusion

A woman who is not part of a decision may have chosen not to be, and that choice itself can be an expression of agency. On the other hand, she may be shut out of a decision she does want to join. Traditional measures run the risk of collapsing these two very different situations into one response. Understanding preferences is key to understanding women's agency.

Preferences over Decision-making

Knowing who isn't involved in household decisions is not very informative unless we also know why. By pairing standard decision-making questions with a module eliciting reasons for participation or lack thereof, this survey tool distinguishes when a woman prefers not to be involved, and when she is prevented from participating. Tested in Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo and India, women's answers show that choosing not to participate in a decision often reflects a form of power; respondents may trust the decision-maker, expect the outcome will align with their preferences, or simply prefer to avoid the time and cognitive burden of engaging, a form of agency traditional decision-making measures would miss.²



A woman raises her hand to speak at a community meeting in Aurangabad

Motivational Autonomy and Internalized Norms

Two people can do the same thing for very different reasons. Existing vignette-based measures, grounded in Self-Determination Theory,³ distinguish three: coercion, the wish to avoid disapproval, and genuine choice. This tool adds a fourth: acting in the way they feel is socially appropriate for an honorable person. In Ethiopia and Guatemala these motivations coexist rather than compete, with most respondents who say they act on their own values also identifying with the socially-appropriate vignette for the same decision. Adding the fourth vignette to the standard measure strengthens its association with welfare and agency outcomes in both countries.

Gender and Occupation: Automatic Cognition Test

Stated gender attitudes often diverge from the implicit beliefs that actually drive occupational choices and aspirations. Simpler to administer than the Implicit Association Test (IAT),⁴ this tool reveals automatic cognitive links between gender and occupational categories, capturing unconscious biases that shape labor market behavior. While the tool successfully detects implicit occupational gender bias in both Uganda and India, the structure of that bias differs by labor-market context; in Uganda, where women's labor force participation is higher, resistance concentrates against men entering female-typed occupations; in India, where participation is lower, bias tracks local employment norms, showing that the tool captures not just whether bias exists but the form it takes in a given labor market.

² Hillebrand, M., Doss, C. R., Masino, S., Querejeta, M., Donald, A., Seymour, G., and Clingain, C. (2025). *Deciding not to decide: When is there power in not deciding?* Policy Research Working Paper 11065. Washington, DC: World Bank.

³ Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). *Self-Determination Theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being.*

⁴ *The Implicit Association Test (developed by Greenwald et al. in 1998) is a psychological tool designed to measure unconscious biases by assessing the speed at which individuals associate different concepts.*

Gender Equality: Critical Consciousness Scale

Empowerment programs often assume that women who face inequality recognize it as such, and that recognizing it leads to wanting change and to acting. Adapted for low-income settings, this scale captures these three components of critical consciousness.⁵ Tested with women and adolescent girls in India and Uganda, higher critical consciousness correlates with secondary schooling, labor market engagement, and intra-household decision-making power in both settings; evidence that the tool captures a coherent construct linked to broader empowerment across contexts.

PROCESS

INSIGHT

Decision-making from a process perspective

A decision recorded as “joint” has often been negotiated. That negotiation can carry costs, including economic, social and cognitive costs, which shape whether participation actually reflects agency. Measuring what happened before, during, and after the decision is more informative than the outcome alone.

Goal-setting Capacity Scale

The capacity to form, commit to, and pursue personal goals is a foundational component of agency, yet it usually isn’t captured directly. This eight-item scale measures goal-setting capacity across three dimensions: creating goals and acting on them, goal clarity, and how important goals are to the respondent. Research in Kenya, Tanzania, and Malawi using this tool found that an increase in goal-setting capacity is associated with higher labor force participation and a reduction in food insecurity, with effects on labor supply approximately twice as large for women as for men.⁶

Algorithmic Assessment of Agency

Open-ended narratives can capture dimensions of agency that closed-ended survey questions miss, but hand-coding them is slow, costly, and hard to replicate. This tool processes interview transcripts using unsupervised text methods to produce a reproducible agency score

from women’s own accounts of how they make decisions. Validated against 202 expert-coded interviews in Uganda, the simplest marker (how often a woman makes herself the grammatical subject of her own sentences) correlates with the expert benchmark as well as or better than word-embedding approaches, and comparably to LLM-based scoring, at a fraction of the cost.

Valuation of Time and Money

Income gains do not always mean welfare gains. Respondents may value time, flexibility, or control over their earnings more than the marginal dollar itself. Through paired hypothetical-wage questions, this tool measures how much men and women will trade off household income to be paid directly rather than through their spouse, and to set their own schedule rather than have it set by an employer, while asking respondents why they chose as they did. In Rwanda and India, how much someone will trade off household income to be paid directly is often driven by things other than weak bargaining power, including gender norms, precautionary savings against future relationship instability, and intrinsic valuation of autonomy—indicating that asking *why* matters as much as asking *how much*.

SAMPLE ITEM – Paired hypothetical-wage questions

Q1. “Imagine I were to offer you a job. The job consists of agricultural labor, and wages would be paid in cash to you. The employer would set the days and hours that you would work. What would the daily wage have to be for you to be interested in the job (that is, work there full-time for at least the coming agricultural season)?”

Q2. “Imagine I were to offer you a job. The job consists of agricultural labor, and wages would be paid in cash to your spouse. The employer would set the days and hours that you would work. What would the daily wage have to be for you to be interested in the job (that is, work there full-time for at least the coming agricultural season)?”

The difference reveals how much household income the respondent will trade off to be paid directly rather than through their spouse. A follow-up asks respondents to select the primary reason for the difference—e.g., “I care about growing my private savings,” “my spouse would spend the money on things I don’t agree with,” “we share all finances equally.”

⁵ Critical consciousness is defined as the capacity of oppressed or marginalized people to critically analyze their social and political conditions, endorse societal equality, and take action to change perceived inequities (Freire, 1973).

⁶ Clingain, C., Donald, A., and Hernandez-de-Benito, M. (2026). Measuring agency through psychological constructs in lower-income settings. Policy Research Working Paper 11401. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Unpacking Joint Decision-making

Across many studies and contexts, women report joint decision-making more often than men. Standard decision-making modules ask who made the decision, but not what the respondent means by “joint.” Through vignette-based scenarios, this module captures joint decision-making as a continuum and asks respondents which definition of “joint” describes their arrangement. In India and Uganda, respondents who say decisions are sometimes made together and sometimes by one spouse alone report substantially higher food insecurity than those who say they always discuss and decide together—which standard questions miss, since both report “joint.”

Inter-personal Conflict Strategies

Household decisions are straightforward when everyone agrees. But what happens when there is disagreement? This tool combines survey questions with a set of vignettes to identify strategies individuals deploy in moments of inter-personal conflict, and the differences in conflict styles within relationships. Piloted in Kenya and India, different conflict strategies show distinct correlate profiles in every sample: yielding strategies (compromising, obliging) track lower wellbeing and higher food insecurity, while assertive strategies (control, collaborating) track intra-household decision-making power.

Persuasion

When household members disagree, the process of reaching a decision, not just its outcome, has important implications for wellbeing and power. This set of survey questions captures the tactics men and women use to influence household decisions and whether those attempts succeed. In India and Uganda, most respondents report little disagreement with their spouse, yet a majority describe using tactics to change their spouse’s mind. The tactics differ by setting: in Kenya and Uganda, making the case that the decision benefits the household is the most common strategy, while in India it is offering something in exchange.

PRICE

Resistance and Backlash

Agency is constrained not only by a person’s individual capacity but also by the social cost of exercising it. This module directly measures the resistance and backlash women face when they participate in household decisions. In both Kenya and India, reports of backlash, both experienced and anticipated, are frequent and consistently linked to lower wellbeing across every sample, while reports of positive consequences (more spousal trust) show the opposite pattern, evidence that the tool meaningfully captures the costs and rewards of participating in household decisions.⁷

Bandwidth Depletion

Material scarcity and cognitive overload deplete mental bandwidth and can impair the quality of decision-making even when preferences and knowledge remain unchanged. This measure asks respondents directly how much mental space they have for important decisions. Tested in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya and Nigeria, women consistently report less mental space than men. In a Nigerian panel, the measure tracks change over time, with gains in bandwidth associated with gains in assets and income.



⁷ Hillebrand, M., Doss, C. R., Masino, S., Querejeta, M., Donald, A., Seymour, G., and Clingain, C. (2025). *Deciding not to decide: When is there power in not deciding?* Policy Research Working Paper 11065. Washington, DC: World Bank.

SENSE OF CONTROL AND EFFICACY

A woman's sense of control over her own life shapes whether and how she acts on her goals. Yet women spend roughly three times as many hours as men on unpaid domestic and care work, and more often attribute life outcomes to forces beyond their control. Existing measures leave gaps: they treat time use as time poverty rather than a matter of agency, and struggle to capture women's sense of economic control or the power they derive from acting collectively. This set of tools allows for improved measurement of three common forms of an individual's sense of control: belief in one's own capacity to act (**power-within**), the actual ability to act on one's goal (**power-to**), and the capacity to pursue goals collectively (**power-with**).⁸

POWER-WITHIN

Generalized Livelihoods Self-Efficacy Scale

This is the first generalized self-efficacy instrument that captures confidence in safeguarding and expanding one's livelihood. Validated in low-income, low-literacy settings where existing measures have proved unreliable, it measures whether respondents feel they have the skills, resources, and decision-making power to engage in economic activities. Women who score higher are more likely to work, work more hours, and earn and profit more, and they report less food insecurity; in Kenya, higher scores are also associated with a 3 percentage-point drop in lifetime exposure to intimate partner violence.⁹

SAMPLE ITEM – Scale

"Please tell me if you completely disagree, mostly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, mostly agree, or completely agree with each statement."

- I am able to work outside the home if I want to.
- I am able to decide how household resources are used to pursue economic activities.
- I have the confidence I need to succeed in my income-generating activities.

Three of ten items shown; scored on a 5-point Likert scale.

Agricultural Self-Efficacy Scale

No self-efficacy scale previously existed for smallholder agriculture, despite the centrality of agriculture to livelihoods in lower-income settings. This scale measures confidence in performing concrete farming tasks, from identifying the best crops to plant to obtaining loans for inputs. Across Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda,¹⁰ this tool reveals that higher agricultural self-efficacy is associated with greater labor supply, higher life satisfaction, and stronger intra-household decision-making, with effects at least twice as large for women as for men, and the labor-supply link holding for women only.

Short-form Locus of Control Scale

Whether people attribute outcomes to their own actions or to external forces such as luck, fate, or others' decisions predicts a wide range of economic behaviors. The one existing short-form multidimensional scale was validated only with US university students, and does not distinguish which "powerful others" respondents have in mind—household members or community members. This scale addresses both gaps. Across Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi and Uganda, internal locus of control is associated with reduced food insecurity and enhanced intra-household decision-making for women.¹¹

⁸ Rowlands, J. (1997). *Questioning empowerment: Working with women in Honduras*. Oxford: Oxfam.

⁹ Clingain, C., Donald, A., and Hernandez-de-Benito, M. (2026). *Measuring agency through psychological constructs in lower-income settings*. Policy Research Working Paper 11401. Washington, DC: World Bank.

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ *Ibid*

POWER-TO

Time-use Agency

Standard time-use surveys record what women do, but not how much say they had in doing it. This module measures agency over time allocation directly, capturing whether women have real control over how they spend their time across productive, reproductive, and leisure activities, providing a more comprehensive picture of a woman's economic autonomy. In Malawi, women report significantly less flexibility than men over the timing of their activities across nearly every domain, and this inflexibility is empirically distinct from time poverty, remaining linked to weaker employment and wellbeing outcomes even after accounting for how much time women spend on unpaid work.¹²

Cognitive Labor

Cognitive labor—the mental work of anticipating the needs of family members, identifying options for meeting those needs, deciding among the options, and monitoring the results of those decisions—is viewed in many societies as women's responsibility. This module measures who does the thinking and planning for different household tasks using easily understandable language. In Ethiopia, cognitive labor is associated with divergent agricultural outcomes for men and women. It is also partly invisible: in matched couples, women's planning goes unrecognized by their husbands nearly twice as often as the reverse, a dimension of household inequality that standard time-use and care-work modules miss.

POWER-WITH

Collective Agency

Measures that only look at individual agency can miss the “power-with” dimension of empowerment, the capacity to identify and achieve goals through collective action. This tool measures women's participation in and experience of collective agency through groups, capturing a critical mechanism through which women build skills, expand networks, and advance economically, socially, and politically beyond the household. In India, the quality of a group's collective functioning, not simply whether women are members, predicts individual empowerment outcomes such as self-efficacy and household decision-making power, making a case for moving program monitoring beyond binary membership counts toward the group-process measures this tool captures.

Conclusion

Measuring agency well requires asking respondents directly about their own lives: how they make decisions, what they want, what it costs them to act, and how much say they truly hold—dimensions that standard surveys have struggled to capture. This new set of tools from the MAGNET initiative now makes that possible across three dimensions of agency: control over assets, goal-setting and decision-making, and sense of control and efficacy. Rigorously tested across contexts, they are freely available and designed for use at scale, whether by national statistical offices running household surveys or program teams designing and evaluating interventions. This better measurement will collectively allow us to understand women's agency more deeply, and design policies, programs, and operations that deliver.

Instruments, translations, statistical annexes, and CAPI files are available at magnet.ifpri.info.

¹² Daum, T., Kilic, T., Koolwal, G., Seymour, G., and Vundru, W. D. (2026). Moving beyond time poverty: Measuring women's and men's time-use agency. Policy Research Working Paper 11343. Washington, DC: World Bank.

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