



## Awareness of Women's Decision-Making Power in The Household

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**KEYWORDS:** Awareness, decision-making power, women, family, gender equality.

**ABSTRACT:** Women's decision-making power is an important indicator that reflects gender equality in the family and in the society. Awareness on decision-making power plays a vital role in promoting decision-making power in the household.

This paper focuses on the awareness of women's decision-making power in the household based on the results of the research "Women's decision-making power in performing family's function today" conducted by a research group from the Vietnam Women's Academy. Data were collected in 7 provinces/cities<sup>1</sup>, representing 7 socio-economic regions of Vietnam with a quantitative sample size of 2,030 participants and a qualitative sample size of 140 participants. The awareness of women's decision-making power in the family was evaluated on different aspects: awareness of self-determination, awareness of bargaining power; awareness of production, reproduction, and external decision-making power. The results showed that husbands' and wives' perceptions of decision-making power in the families was generally equal. Many people supported husbands' and wives' self-determination in building a harmonious relationship. With regards to joint activities, awareness on external affairs was relatively equal between wives and husbands. However, people's awareness on reproductive function was unequal and affected by gender perceptions. This paper also provides recommendations to raise people's awareness on women's decision-making power in the household to promote gender equality.

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### 1. JUSTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

The decision-making power of women in the family is considered an important factor affecting gender equality, especially gender equality in the family. This is reflected in different existing papers (Hou, 2011; Darge, 2014; Nguyen Huu Minh & Tran Thi Hong, 2019). When women have decision-making power in the family, their status increases, and family members benefit from this decision-making status. For example, women often make decisions on food purchasing, family nutrition and household expenditures (Hagos et al., 2017: 66). When women have decision-making power, girls in the family are more likely to go to school and receive investment in their higher education (Hou, 2011: 4). Therefore, the decision-making power of women in the family is very important. However, the decision-making power of women in the family is limited. The wife is still considered more suitable for housework and care tasks, while men are more suitable for "bigger" tasks such as production, business, and reception.

There are different studies on the decision-making power of women in the family; however, research related to the perception of the decision-making rights of women in the family is very limited. Research by Khan and Sajid (2011) has mentioned the perception of the decision-making power of women in the family when posing the question of whether women should decide on family activities or not. Meanwhile, awareness of women's decision-making rights in the family is very important. On the one hand, in helping women, men as well as the community will understand the benefits of women's decision-making and on the other hand, women will perform better in decision-making when they have better awareness of their decision-making power in the family.

This paper is written based on data from the research on women's decision-making power in performing family functions, conducted by the Vietnam Women's Academy. The objective of the study is to build a database of women's decision-making power

<sup>1</sup> According to the former administrative place names (before July 1, 2025)

in the family, as a basis for the Vietnam Women's Union to develop interventions and support plans for women; to improve the role and position of women in the family and to promote gender equality in the family.

The research subjects were women and men representing married households, living in rural and urban areas, of different ages, ethnicities, education levels, living standards, occupations, and provincial leaders in the survey area. The research was carried out with 2,100 quantitative survey questionnaires (subjects were married couples, representing households), in which the number of questionnaires that met the requirements for synthesis and analysis was 2,030. In addition, the study also conducted in-depth interviews with 28 cases in 7 provinces (two household representatives and two provincial leaders from each province were interviewed); 14 group discussions in 7 provinces (two group discussions were conducted in each province - one group of men and one group of women).

Decision-making power in the family, which is closely tied to the power disparity between husband and wife. Therefore, decision-making power, in this paper, is not about the universal right of everyone (the right to make decisions) but related to the role, position, confidence and autonomy of the decision maker. Rather, it is the right to self-determination, the right to decide. Women's decision-making power is linked to bargaining power and the impact that decision-making power has on their lives and that of other family members. Decision making includes personal decision making and family decision making. Personal decision-making (personal self-determination) includes decisions related to the woman herself, such as decisions about her future, work, and reproductive health care. Meanwhile, decisions affecting the family include purchase of consumer goods, medical treatment, migration, investment, property purchase, and business; or decisions related to their children such as choosing schools for their children, investing in their children's education, and finding marriage partners for their children.

**2. PERCEPTION OF DECISION-MAKING POWER OF WOMEN IN THE FAMILY**

Awareness of decision-making power in the family has important implications for everyone's decision-making behavior. Although it may not completely dominate decision-making, levels of awareness help to predict somewhat the reality of decision-making in the families of women and men. The study examined decision-making power in the family in the following areas: Perception of personal self-determination, bargaining power and perception of decision-making power in performing family activities. To find out the extent of the audience's perception of decision-making power in each of the above-mentioned areas, the research has made relevant statements with 5 selected response levels: 1- Completely disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Confused, 4- Agree, 5 - Totally agree. The higher the average score given by the respondents on each statement, the higher their level of agreement with those statements.

**2.1 Awareness of personal self-determination**

Before examining the perception of decision-making power in specific family activities, we explored perceptions of individual self-determination and bargaining power between husband and wife in the family.

The study was interested in whether respondents thought that the wife in the family should have the right to personal self-determination. Women's right to personal self-determination includes the ability to make decisions on their own issues and participate in activities outside the family without consulting their husband. Additionally, the right to self-determination is also reflected in the ability to express opinions and participate in discussions with their husbands on common issues. Although the respondents strongly supported the wife's right to voice their thoughts, opinions, or the right to discuss, they were less supportive of women having the right to decide on their own issues. Based on the research data, we find that the average score of the statements "I think that both husband and wife have the right to express their thoughts and opinions" and "I think that both husband and wife have the right to discuss decision making in the family" is quite high, at 4.68 and 4.71, respectively. However, the average score of the statement "I think that a wife's participation in social activities, travel, entertainment, and meetings... does not necessarily have to be allowed by her husband" is only 3.62, showing the respondents' hesitation (Table 1).

**Table 1. Respondent's perception of personal self-determination**

Statement	Rate of agreement	Average score
I believe that both husband and wife have the right to express their thoughts and opinions	91.2	4.68
I believe that both husband and wife have the right to discuss and make decisions in the family	92.4	4.71
I believe that the wife has the right to decide on her own issues without the consent of her husband most of all.	73.8	4.05
I think that the wife participates in social activities, travel, entertainment, and meetings ... not necessarily with her husband's permission.	60.6	3.62

The analysis by gender of the respondents showed that the male respondents' views are more prejudiced, with their level of agreement on all statements about women's self-determination being lower than that of the female respondents (Table 2).

**Table 2. Perception of individual self-determination by gender of respondents**

Statement		Respondent	
		Women	Men
I believe that both husband and wife have the right to express their thoughts and opinions	N	1095	934
	AVG	4,70	4,66
I believe that both husband and wife have the right to discuss and make decisions in the family	N	1095	933
	AVG	4.72	4.71
I believe that the wife has the right to decide on her own issues without necessarily having the consent of her husband.	N	1090	931
	AVG	4.15	3.94
I think that the wife's participation in social activities, travel, entertainment, and meetings... does not necessarily have to be allowed by her husband.	N	1093	934
	AVG	3.67	3.55

With regards to personal self-determination, men have not yet accepted their wives participating in social activities such as travel, playing, entertainment, and meeting without consulting their husbands. The average score of men in this category is relatively low, with 3.55, lower than the overall average score of respondents (3.62). Notably, even women have not expressed agreement with the wife's self-determination to participate in social activities (average score is 3.67).

*Mostly I decide by myself what to buy and what to wear, as my husband's opinion is not relevant to those activities. But depending on the situation, if I travelled far away, I would consult my husband, while I would not if I only went somewhere close, such as to wash my hair.*

(In-depth interview, female, 40 years old, Kien Giang province)

**2.2 Perception of bargaining power between husband and wife**

The bargaining power in the family can be understood as the agreement between husband and wife to come to decisions related to family affairs. Women and men have different roles and priorities when it comes to decision-making. However, decisions are reached through a negotiation process in which each family member tries to use the resources they have at their disposal to achieve a desired end. As for bargaining power, the research results show a few points worth noting.

**Table 3. Respondents' perception of bargaining power**

Statement	Number	Average score	Standard deviation
I think that the husband has the right to decide, the wife must listen to her husband most of all	2028	1.64	1.26
I think whoever has a higher social status will be the one to decide in the family	2021	1.56	1.18
I think whoever earns more will decide in the family	2022	1.53	1.13
I think whoever is more qualified and knowledgeable will be the one to decide in the family	2023	1.83	1.37
I think a wise wife is someone who knows how to convince her husband when making decisions	2022	4.12	1.37
I think that if husband and wife do not agree, both should find a way to negotiate and reconcile with each other	2025	4.61	0.97

According to the respondents' point of view, the husband's position, social status, higher income, education, and knowledge should not affect the position of the decision maker in the family. The level of approval towards negative statements on this subject was relatively low (average score of less than 2 points)(Table 3). As can be seen, that perception is relatively beneficial for women. Because men are more likely to possess these resources at higher levels than women. In this study, the had higher education and income than women. Compared with other resources, the individual's level of knowledge and qualifications seems to be the factor that was perceived to have the most influence on the decision-making position (average score of 1.83).

*If women are more well-equipped in these areas, they should make the decisions and if not, they need to discuss with husbands or leave the decisions to them. It depends on the situation. There are some things that the husband and wife must discuss and decide on together.*

(Men's group discussion, Kien Giang province)

Another remarkable point drawn from the research results is that a wife who wants to expand her influence needs to have the skill of persuading her husband: *"I think a wise wife is one who knows how to convince her husband when making decisions"*

(average score of 4.12). This emphasizes that the husband still plays the main role in deciding the affairs of the family and the wife participates in the decision through negotiation and persuasion.

However, those surveyed seemed to want to build a harmonious husband and wife relationship when they think that *"if the husband and wife do not agree, then both should find a way to negotiate and reconcile each other"* (average score of 4.61).

*Faced with the issue of conflicting views in the family, the wife and her husband need to understand each other. In the affairs of society or on the issues of neighbors, sometimes the couple have opposing views, but they should not argue much, as each person should respect the other's point of view. The husband and wife need to understand each other.* (In-depth interview, male, 44 years old, Hung Yen province)

Research results also show that ethnic minorities attach more importance to the influence of factors such as the husband's position, social status, and higher income; the level and understanding of decision-making rights in the family is clearer than that of Kinh people (Table 4).

**Table 4. Respondents' perception of bargaining power by ethnicity**

Statement	Ethnic group	N	Average score	P-value
I think that the husband has the right to decide, the wife must listen to her husband most of all	Kinh	1671	1,52	<0,001
	Ethnic minority	334	2,12	
I think whoever has a higher social status will be the one to decide in the family	Kinh	1666	1,47	<0,001
	Ethnic minority	332	1,93	
I think whoever earns more will decide in the family	Kinh	1668	1,43	<0,001
	Ethnic minority	331	1,95	
I think whoever is more qualified and knowledgeable will be the one to decide in the family	Kinh	1668	1,73	<0,001
	Ethnic minority	332	2,27	
I think a wise wife is someone who knows how to convince her husband when making decisions	Kinh	1665	4,20	<0,001
	Ethnic minority	335	3,71	
I think that if husband and wife do not agree, both should find a way to negotiate and reconcile with each other	Kinh	1668	4,67	<0,001
	Ethnic minority	334	4,27	

Thus, the perception of the right to self-determination and bargaining power of the survey participants is relatively equal with respect to the sharing of opinions, thoughts, and discussions of both the husband and the wife. However, prejudice still exists against women's right to self-determination in personal matters, including participation in social activities. In addition, women are considered "supporting roles", wherein they must skillfully persuade their husbands when making decisions.

**2.3 Awareness of decision-making power in carrying out some family activities**

The study investigated the perception of women's decision-making power in production and expenditure activities, reproduction activities and in public affairs. For production and expenditure activities, the 2017 Vietnam Family Survey has shown a positive trend in the relationship between men and women compared to the results of the 2006 Vietnam Family Survey. The proportion of husbands deciding on important tasks such as investment in production/business, purchasing expensive items, buying and selling/constructing/repairing houses has reduced, while the proportion of both husbands and wives making joint decisions on these tasks has markedly increased (Nguyen Huu Minh & Tran Thi Hong, 2019). The results of this study also show that the respondents have a more gender-equal perspective on the family's right to decide on production and expenditure. The fact that the husband decides on his own the direction of investment, production, and business of the family, ignoring his wife's perspective is not supported by many, with a low average score (1.61). However, the husband is still considered the final decision maker and the wife mainly participates in the discussion.

*The husband undertakes business affairs. The husband and wife should discuss these matters together and agree on how to implement them, but while leaning more towards the husband's opinion.* (In-depth interview, female, 35 years old, Phu Yen province)

At the same time, they do not agree to deny the wife's right to have information about her husband's income and expenditure. Specifically, the average score of the statement "The wife does not have the right to know about her husband's income and expenses" is 1.51, showing the respondents' disagreement.

**Table 5. Perception of the right to decide on production and spending**

Statement	N	Average score	Standard deviation
In my opinion, the husband should be the one to decide the direction of investment, production, and business of the family without having to discuss with his wife.	2024	1.61	1.23
In my opinion, the wife has no right to know about the income and expenditure of her husband	2023	1.51	1.17
In my opinion, it should be clear: the wife decides the small daily expenses, while the husband decides the big expenses such as buying expensive properties, buying/selling, building/renovating a house.	2024	2.66	1.67

However, the respondents had a mixed attitude with the statement that *"the wife decides on small daily expenses, while the husband decides on big expenses such as buying expensive properties, buying/selling, building/repairing houses"* with an average of 2.66. That reflects the fact that in many people's minds, a woman's decision scope should still be in everyday expenses such as consumer shopping.

*In the family, the men make the big decisions such as buying a house or buying land. If the women find it good, they will support it. Women are afraid of risks, so they do not dare make such decisions. If something were to happen later, I would be tired. Women decide matters in the house, such as taking care of children and buying household appliances.* (In-depth interview, female, 40 years old, Kien Giang province)

Although both do not support gender inequality in production and spending decisions, men's attitudes towards this issue are not as clear as women's. This is reflected in the difference in the degree of agreement with the statements made. Specifically, the average score of women with the statement that *"the husband should be the one to decide the direction of investment, production and business of the family without having to discuss with his wife"* is 1.52 while the average score of men is 1.69 ( $P < 0.001$ ). Similarly, the statement *"the wife has no right to know about the income and expenditure of her husband"* has the average score of men and women standing at 1.58 and 1.45, respectively ( $P < 0.001$ ).

Among family activities, the perception of the right to decide on reproduction shows the most obvious gender bias. First, it is reflected in the point of view of whom the responsibility for contraception falls upon and who decides the sexual activity between the couple. Women are still considered to have a passive and submissive position in sex life. Therefore, the level of agreement of the subjects with the statement *"The wife has the right to refuse her husband's physiological needs"* was relatively low with an average score of 2.53. In contrast, they agreed more with the statement that *"contraception is the responsibility of women"* (average score of 3.27). This shows that the respondents still have relatively gender-biased thoughts in this issue.

**Table 6. Perception of decision-making power in reproduction activities**

Statement	N	Average score	Standard deviation
I think that if the husband has decided to have more children, even if the wife does not want to, she still has to have more children	2020	1.43	1.06
In my opinion, the wife has a decisive voice in the field of housework	2019	3.50	1.66
In my opinion, a wife has the right to refuse her husband's physiological needs	2014	2.53	1.77
In my opinion, contraception is the responsibility of the woman	2017	3.27	1.66

In addition, survey respondents are relatively supportive of women as decision makers on issues related to housework (average score of 3.50). Housework is still associated with a woman's roles and responsibilities, so they think that women should make decisions in such activities.

*In my opinion, women should decide the housework. It's still the same today. Even if I gave a man his job, I would not feel secure, they can't do it as well as me. For important things, the husband and the wife should discuss with each other.* (In-depth interview, female, 44 years old, Hung Yen province)

However, on the topic of reproduction, respondents expressed their views about the right to decide the number of children to have. The statement that the study made *"If the husband has decided to have more children, he will have, even if the wife does not want to have more children"* is not agreed upon by many, with a very low average score (1.43). This proves that the decision to have more children is largely agreed to require considering the consent of the wife, not just the will of the husband.

Comparing the perceptions of men and women, the research results show that in the decision to have more children and the responsibility for contraception, women are more gender stereotyped than men. Specifically, the level of opposition to the statement that "if the husband has decided to have more children, even if the wife does not want to have more children" of men is higher than that of women, with an average score of 1.37 and 1.47, respectively ( $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, the statement that "contraception is women's responsibility" is supported more by women than men (average score respectively of 3.35 compared to 3.17;  $p < 0.001$ ). In sexual relations, most men do not agree that the wife has the right to refuse her husband's physiological needs (average score of 2.38). Although women had different views compared to men, women's attitudes on this issue were unclear (average score of 2.66). That proves they still do not really agree with women having the right to decide whether to have sex with their husbands or not. Regarding housework, female respondents agree with the statement that "the wife has a voice in housework" higher than men, with an average score of 3.58 compared to 3.41 ( $p < 0.001$ ). The above figures partly reflect the fact that the field of reproduction is still associated with the roles and responsibilities of women, such as housework and contraception. Especially, even women think that is what they have to do and decide in the family.

For external activities, this paper focuses on studying the awareness of women's decision-making power in organizing family events, the relationship with the family and relatives on both the husband's and wife's sides as well as the relationship with neighbours. The concept of "men are public, women are private" is no longer consistent with the reality of today's families. Survey participants believe that external activities, behaviour, and communication should be decided by both husband and wife. At the same time, the subjects disagreed with the notion that husbands alone determine the relationships with neighbors; family, relatives on the paternal side; holding anniversaries, weddings, funerals... The average score for each of the above statements is quite low, ranging from 1.64 to 2.01. On the contrary, they strongly agree with the fact that the husband and wife discuss and decide to behave and relate to their families and relatives on both sides (average score of 4.52).

**Table 7. Perception of decision-making power in public affairs**

Statement	N	Average score	Standard deviation
In my opinion, the organization of anniversaries, weddings and funerals should be arranged and decided by the husband and executed by the wife.	2021	2,01	1,48
In my opinion, the behavior and relationship with family and relatives on the husband's side is decided by the husband, and the wife's side is decided by the wife.	2022	1,76	1,34
In my opinion, how to deal with neighbors is decided by the husband	2016	1,64	1,25
In my opinion, the behavior and relationship with family and relatives on both sides must be discussed and decided by the couple	2021	4,52	1,12
Valid N (listwise)	2008		

Analyzing by gender, the difference in the perception of men and women is reflected in the organization of family events such as anniversaries, filial piety, joy and dealing with the outside matters. In general, both genders expressed disagreement with the notions of inequality or gender discrimination when deciding on public affairs. However, men's mean scores on these statements are all higher than women's, reflecting that the stereotype that the family's external activities are their "territory" still exists (Table 8).

**Table 8. Perception of respondents' right to decide on public affairs by gender**

Statement	Respondent	N	Average score	Standard deviation
In my opinion, the organization of anniversaries, weddings and funerals should be arranged and decided by the husband and executed by the wife.	Women	1091	1.92	1.43
	Men	930	2.11	1.53
In my opinion, the behavior and relationship with family and relatives on the husband's side is decided by the husband, and the wife's side is decided by the wife.	Women	1090	1.71	1.29
	Men	932	1.82	1.39
In my opinion, how to deal with neighbors is decided by the husband	Women	1090	1.58	1.19
	Men	926	1.72	1.31
In my opinion, the behavior and relationship with family and relatives on both sides must be discussed and decided by the couple	Women	1089	4.53	1.11
	Men	932	4,50	1,14

In summary, the perception of women's decision-making right in carrying out family activities is positive, especially public affairs, production, and spending. From the respondents' point of view, women can participate in discussions on investment, production, and business directions, have the right to know about the income and expenditure of the husband and decide on small expenses. Women also have the right to discuss and decide on the behavior and relations with their families and relatives on both sides, the relationship with their neighbors and the organization of events for the family. In this sense, they are not always submissive to their husbands. Even so, there is still a gender stereotype in the minds of many people who think that contraception is the responsibility of women, that housework is the work of women and that women should not deny their husband's physiological needs.

### 3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has analyzed the perception of decision-making power of women in Vietnamese families. Research results show that the perception of decision-making power of women in the family today has seen positive changes. The decision-making power of women in the family is recognized by both women and men. However, it seems that gender stereotypes in production, spending and external affairs still exist amongst a part of the population. Especially in the field of reproduction, there has not been a significant change in how people think. For example, housework is work that women undertake and decide on, that the wife must ask her husband's permission wherever she goes; that contraception is the responsibility of women or that women should not deny their husband's physiological needs. In addition, men tend to be less supportive of some issues where women can potentially take control and intervene in, such as deciding the number of children, or knowing information about her husband's income and expenditure.

On the basis of research results, this paper proposes recommendations to raise awareness of women's decision-making power in the family, and promote gender equality in the family. *First*, human rights laws and policies need to show more clearly the equal rights and decision-making roles of women in the family and in society. The State needs to issue more policies related to gender equality, so that women can make more progress in the family and in society, effectively contributing to the development of individuals, families, and society. *Second*, the Ministry of Education and Training needs to have a roadmap and specific plan to bring training programs about family, family values and roles, and gender equality into all levels of education as compulsory knowledge, helping future owners of the country acquire the right attitude and behavior for the development of the family and society. *Third*, relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the Ministry of Information and Communications, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs and the Vietnam Women's Union need to communicate more widely on gender equality, gender equality in the family, as well as the decision-making power of women in the family. The media should emphasize the role of men in promoting gender equality, as well as the role of heads of agencies, organizations and local leaders in promoting gender equality, as well as focusing on eliminating gender stereotypes about women's dependent roles in the family and in society. *Fourth*, local authorities should pay attention to bringing gender equality in general and gender equality in the family in particular to the focus of local socio-economic development tasks and devote resources to performing said tasks, as well as coordinate with the local Women's Union to implement and carry out annual assessments. *Fifth*, women need to be aware of the decision-making power of the wife in the family. This will help them confidently, actively participate in decision-making activities, creating many benefits for the family and society.

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