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Asset control among rural households in Petén, Guatemala: Evidence on gendered and joint decision making

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Abstract

The complexity of household decision making over livelihood assets poses a significant challenge and has development implications. A growing body of literature sheds light on gendered decision making in farming households, with the aim to identify patterns of inequality and underlying factors. In our analysis of six community forest enterprises (CFEs) in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Petén, Guatemala, we adopted a gender lens for a survey among CFE member households by defining 17 areas of decision making linked with natural, human, social, physical and financial capitals. Based on a random sample of 170 households, we sought to identify areas of gender-differentiated decision making and those where decisions are taken jointly. Women and men respondents were asked separately about each other's role in decision making for cross-checking.

Results varied across households and livelihood assets, both in terms of perceived roles in decision making and decision making as such. Male involvement was particularly strong in decisions related to natural, physical, and social capitals. Women's involvement was relatively stronger for human capital, particularly regarding decisions on health and child education. Perceptions on each other's role in decision making were congruent between women and men for some areas, but markedly different for others. Such discrepancies can be linked with gender norms attributing decision-making authority in certain areas to men or women. Importantly, despite patterns of gender-differentiated decision making across the four capitals mentioned, we found a significantly higher level of joint decision making with regard to financial capital. This is striking as decisions around household income have widely been purported to be male dominated.

The results suggest that, despite decisions over certain livelihood assets being skewed towards one gender, financial capital stands out as an area of joint decision making. Being an integral part of a household's economic base, gender-equitable control over financial capital underscores a prominent role of women in household decision making in the CFEs surveyed. The methodological approach pursued and the results have implications for policies and development interventions aimed at transforming gender relations in rural households in pursuit of gender equality.

Keywords: Decision making, gender equality, livelihood assets, Maya Biosphere Reserve

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