

Educational workshops may bolster women's empowerment

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Couples participate in a workshop as part of the women's empowerment study in Ibadan, Nigeria. Credit: Women Working with Partners

Researchers at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, led a randomized control trial in Ibadan, Nigeria, to evaluate educational programs to empower women by working with couples in three critical areas: Spousal relations, and financial and reproductive decision-making.

The researchers report an increase in household [decision-making](#) by women. The evidence was mixed among those randomized to participate

in only one or two of the areas. The findings appear in the journal *Development in Practice*.

The researchers randomized more than 1,000 male-female domestic partners and married couples to take part in one of four arms with one or more weekly two-hour group education sessions: Sessions designed to impart a critical understanding of gender roles and norms, as well as relationship strengthening; sessions on gender socialization plus sessions on financial literacy and household budget management; sessions on gender socialization and financial literacy plus couple counseling on [family planning](#); and a control group. All sessions were led by a facilitator and included individual and group activities, as well as role-play.

The researchers observed positive trends toward increases in women's household decision-making and decisions regarding the use of husbands' earnings in all three intervention arms, as compared to the control arm. However, the results were significant only in the arm that received all three interventions, and only marginally significant in the first and second arms. Financial decision-making scores significantly improved only in the second arm, were marginally significant in the first arm, and non-significant in the arm that received all three interventions. The researchers say additional qualitative research is needed to understand why the program worked in some decision-making domains versus others. Inconsistent findings might also be the result of the way results were measured in questionnaires

"The intervention appeared to be most successful in areas where women continue to be less active, such as general household and financial decisions, as well as decisions pertaining to the use of men's earnings," says senior author Neetu John, Ph.D., assistant professor of population and family health at Columbia Mailman School. "On the other hand, the intervention was less effective in areas where the trend may already be

moving towards increased female or joint decision-making, such as reproductive decision-making and use of women's earnings."

Background

In Nigeria, despite increases in women's education and participation in the formal economy, women continue to grapple with a patriarchal culture, which relegates their position within the household and limits their capacity to exercise choice and agency in their lives. Household division of labor continues to follow traditional gendered roles. The [male partner](#) is the decision-maker on important household and health matters like family spending and whether or when his partner can have children, and when she and her children can receive healthcare.

"Women's empowerment is recognized as an important strategy to foster gender equality, which is linked to health and wellbeing. Our goal is to help women recognize and use resources in their own interest by challenging discriminatory gender and social norms, as well as by creating an enabling environment to foster this process by engaging their male partners," says John.

More information: Funmilola M. OlaOlorun et al, A couple-based gender transformative intervention to enhance women's participation in household decision-making: results from a cluster randomised control trial in Ibadan, Nigeria, *Development in Practice* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/09614524.2021.1937564](https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2021.1937564)

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