Pile sorting innovations: exploring gender norms, power, and equity in sub-Saharan Africa

Christine Bourey, RN\textsuperscript{1} Rob Stephenson, PhD\textsuperscript{1} Doris Bartel, MSN RNC\textsuperscript{2} and Marcie Rubart, MPH\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}HUBERT DEPARTMENT OF GLOBAL HEALTH, EMORY UNIVERSITY ROLLINS SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND \textsuperscript{2}CARE INTERNATIONAL, ATLANTA, GA, USA

Summary
Understanding gender norms, power, and equity is important for developing national and sexual and reproductive health interventions. However, little attention has been given to how to capture the gender ideals and imbalances that inform these relationships in low-resource settings. Data from pile sorting exercises conducted in four gender-segregated focus groups in Ethiopia and Kenya illustrate how the combination of pile sorting and focus group discussions and the application of innovative pile sorting techniques can enhance data collection.

Background
Research exploring gender-based inequities that place women at a distinct health disadvantage has alternately focused on the role of gender relations and interrelationship power, including the extent to which inequities emerge from interrupted gender norms and expectations. Yet little attention has been given to how to capture appropriately nuanced descriptions of gender ideals and imbalances. As a qualitative methodology designed to elicit from participants the social processes by which inequities emerge, pile sorting has the potential to facilitate data collection. However, no studies have explicitly illustrated how pile sorting can be enhanced to facilitate characterizations of and reflection on gender norms and inequities.

Study Setting
Data were collected in East and West Nyanza (Nyamira region) in Ethiopia and in Siaya (Nyanza province) in Kenya. Both settings are characterized by significant gender inequities, early marriage, high fertility, and high unmet need for family planning.

Methods
Pile sorting exercises were conducted in two age-stratified, gender-segregated focus groups of 8-12 participants from one district or village in each country.

Pile sorting within focus group discussions Each group began with three illustrated cards, representing a man, a woman, and a man and woman together (couple). One by one, the facilitator introduced cards labeled with a duty or decision. Participants were asked to discuss and decide together whether the duty was the responsibility of men, women, or both and to indicate their decision by laying the card before the appropriate illustration.

Enabling reflection Innovative pile sorting methods exploited the pile sort as visual representations, allowing participants to see their own attitudes, and tangible representations, construing abstract relationships. Through these techniques, pile sorting provided a framework for participants to reflect on gender norms, investigate role flexibility, and identify agents of social change. For example, Kenyan men disagreed about which gender had the greater burden of responsibility. However, men who referred to the cards uncommonly indicated: “The man takes care of the baby and the woman cooks.” They wish to see a man be able to take care of the baby.

Enabling comparisons Conducting pile sorting within focus group discussions generated visual representations of how men and women perceive gender norms in relation to duties and decisions. These representations facilitated analysis of how participants classify elements by enabling comparisons between genders and communities. As seen below, men and women in Ethiopia agreed that duties and decisions are highly segregated by gender, whereas more heterogeneity emerged in Kenya.

Enabling reflection
Innovative pile sorting methods exploited the pile sort as visual representations, allowing participants to see the way people perceive roles. For example, Kenyan men disagreed about which gender had the greater burden of responsibility. However, men who referred to the cards uncommonly indicated: “The man takes care of the baby and the woman cooks.” They wish to see a man be able to take care of the baby.

Enabling comparisons
Conducting pile sorting within focus group discussions generated visual representations of how men and women perceive gender norms in relation to duties and decisions. These representations facilitated analysis of how participants classify elements by enabling comparisons between genders and communities. As seen below, men and women in Ethiopia agreed that duties and decisions are highly segregated by gender, whereas more heterogeneity emerged in Kenya.

Eliciting explanations
Applying pile sorting to focus group discussions facilitated the collection of narrative data. Pile sorting exercises provided an anchor for discussion, eliciting nuanced explanations and facilitating analyses by helping to explain differences.

For example, during discussions among Kenyan men revealed that responsibility for decisions about buying assets may be male dominated, collaborative, or empower women as owners of financial assets: “If it is the wife, she will say, let us go and buy this.”

Discussions also revealed instances where men and women assigned duties differently but described their allocation identically, members of each gender emphasizing the importance of their participation.

Kenyan women: “Looking after the sick is for everyone. If the woman is away, I remain behind to take care.”

Kenyan men: “A man can look after a sick person [but] it is mostly the woman.”

Developing shared meanings
Using a single set of pile sorting cards in each focus group discussion mandated consensus building. As participants worked collaboratively, negotiation facilitated the development of shared meanings and revealed differences in how men and women conceptualize duties and decisions.

For example, regarding the decision to send children to school, Ethiopian men indicated: “Men and women discuss and do it together [but] the majority of the decisions is that of the husband.”

In contrast, women highlighted that decision-making not only encompasses the ability to influence outcomes through verbal negotiation but also through economic support. They suggested that they influence this decision by leveraging their ability to provide financial assistance.

Conclusions
The results suggest that pile sorting can be easily incorporated to provide nuanced and informative data on gender norms, relationship power, and gender equity in low-resource settings. Conducting pile sorting within focus group discussions and employing innovative applications appear to enable comparative analyses, enrich data quality, and facilitate participants’ abilities to engage and reflect on abstract concepts. Further research is needed to explore the consistency of these benefits across contexts and potential limitations.