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EVIDENCE EXPLAINER

Assessing women's empowerment initiatives collaboratively can create positive change

authored by
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Key messages

– Empowerment (https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125) is the process by which people gain the ability to make strategic choices in their lives and to act upon them, when they previously could not. It is a complex, intangible, political, context-specific and multi-dimensional concept that entails changes at multiple (individual, relational, environmental) levels.

– Even if assessments of empowerment are imperfect, they can contribute to stronger and more accountable programs and policies.

– Qualitative and quantitative methods can both yield valuable information for assessing empowerment; combining them can yield comprehensive information that cannot be acquired by using any method alone.

– Understanding empowerment requires research to embrace and address complexity, to unearth the structural barriers that cause inequality.

– Our review of 15 tools for measuring women's empowerment shows that all tools explore agency, but most neglect structural causes of disempowerment.

– Future research on women's empowerment should seek to better understand the links between empowerment and agriculture, decision-making processes and situations where positive changes in some dimensions of women's empowerment can cause setbacks in others.

Defining women's empowerment can support change, yet is difficult

'Empowerment' is central to Sustainable Development Goal 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."

The struggle for women's empowerment is both historical and contemporary (https://www.jstor.org/stable/25548253). It crosses all geographical borders. It is a collective push against patriarchal structures, and intersecting relations of class, ethnicity, caste, and race that (re)produce discrimination, marginalization and inequality.

However, the original concept of empowerment (https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125) has been diluted since its initial uptake by those involved in international development. Some of the work intended to support empowerment has led to confusion about what 'empowerment' really means.

Empowerment is complex, intangible, political and context specific. The nature and definition of women's empowerment are challenging to capture and assess.

Some of the work intended to support empowerment has led to confusion about what 'empowerment' really means (https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.1212).

The challenge for projects designed to support women's empowerment is to transform the underlying societal structures causing disempowerment.

Understanding the dimensions of empowerment to identify the factors that need to be assessed

Empowerment is the process by which people gain the ability to make strategic choices (https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125) in their lives and to act upon them, when they previously could not. It emphasizes people's freedom (https://scholar.harvard.edu/sen/publications/development-freedom) to define and lead a life they have reason to value (https://doi.org/10.2307/2026184).

People's ability to make and pursue important decisions hinges on three dimensions that we can assess:

– resources available now and in the future – social, material and human

– agency – to make or negotiate decisions

– achievements – well-being outcomes unique to each person.

These dimensions interact. For example, resources increase people's abilities to make choices, and increased agency can lead to achievements as well as increase access to resources.

Agency—a person's ability to define and act upon one's goals—is at the heart of the concept of empowerment, and is difficult to measure.

People can (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.06.018) have individual or 'intrinsic' agency ('power within') and group or 'collective' agency ('power with') (https://doi.org/10.2499/p15738coll2.133060) to act to realize their goals ('power to').

Changes in empowerment can take place at different levels:

– Personal or individual: changes taking place within the person

– Relational: a woman's position relative to others in her family, community, and social network

– Environmental: broad societal institutions and structures (formal and informal)

Assessing empowerment can lead to stronger programs and policies

The field of agricultural research for development (AR4D) increasingly aims to increase women's empowerment –for its intrinsic value and/or because of its important links with health and nutrition, productivity and resource management outcomes.

However, many projects which claim to advance women's empowerment do not define (http://dx.doi.org/10.22004/ag.econ.293596) empowerment, address it in a holistic and contextually relevant way, or examine what constrains women's empowerment.

It is crucial to check whether policies, resources and strategies are working effectively to produce changes that build more equitable, sustainable, rights-affirming, inclusive and peaceful societies.

What we decide to measure, and not measure, reflects and influences what we see as legitimate or important and influences change. Therefore, even if assessments of empowerment are imperfect, having thoughtful measures that shine a light on the multiple dimensions of empowerment are important to advance women's empowerment and gender equality.

Assessing empowerment in AR4D using meaningful multi-dimensional measures can advance women's empowerment by supporting more holistic program and policy design, and providing evidence about what works or not. Some assessments can identify the strong and weak points of initiatives (https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2014.920986) and provide direction on how organizations can strengthen their activities.

Assessing empowerment can build accountability and credibility (https://www.jstor.org/stable/25548253) for organizations – and when conducted in a participatory way that centers the process on local women and men as agents of change,

can in itself challenge existing power relations. Understanding local perceptions
(https://www.fsnnetwork.org/resource/measuring-gender-transformative-change-review-literature-and-promising-practices) of what it means to be 'empowered' is core to assessing empowerment.

Assessing changes in empowerment needs to be done over time and at different levels

Assessing empowerment is challenging. There are issues that relate to ethics
(https://www.awid.org/publications/capturing-change-womens-realities) and how knowledge is
produced (https://www.fsnnetwork.org/resource/measuring-gender-transformative-change-review-literature-and-promising-practices) in this area, including asking who should assess
empowerment and why.

Current development programs and policies tend to favor quantifiable, 'objective'
indicators such as economic measures. While these are very important, they are only one
part of a holistic assessment. Qualitative analyses (http://hdl.handle.net/10986/7441) that
examine social, emotional, and other changes in women's lives – especially as expressed in
women's own words – are also critical for understanding empowerment processes.

Assessing empowerment as a process is challenging because it is often attempted at a
single point in time, but needs to capture changes over time, often dating back to an earlier
reference period.

Many measures are at the individual level, but it is also important to maintain a focus on
collective responsibility and political engagement
(https://www.fsnnetwork.org/resource/measuring-gender-transformative-change-review-literature-and-promising-practices) – including considering how formal and informal rules, including norms,
influence empowerment through households, communities and markets.

Ideally, an analysis of change should consider the different levels of empowerment
described above (individual, relational, environmental).

Understanding empowerment requires research to get 'messier'

Research on empowerment will benefit from respecting different forms of knowledge and
ways of knowing the world, embracing various methodologies, and reaching across
disciplines.

This means moving past the AR4D preference for quantitative data and experimental
designs and being open to change which is non-linear (https://gender.cgiar.org/publications-data/measuring-gender-transformative-change), less visible, intangible and less predictable,
including recognizing unintended negative outcomes.

This shift calls upon many researchers to change the way they think about and do research
(https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3210). Although this type of research is more complex and 'messy',
it can help unearth the structural barriers that create privilege and opportunity for some,
and constraints, exclusions and disempowerment for others.

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods to assess empowerment

How researchers assess empowerment, and the methods and tools they use, depends on the purpose of their research. It may be useful to compare measures of empowerment across space and time, but assessments must also recognize that empowerment is deeply contextual.

Qualitative methods are valuable for understanding context, experiences and processes of change (i.e. explaining how and when change happened), and for eliciting perspectives on empowerment in participants' own words.

But these methods provide data that are less easily comparable than data from quantitative methods – and decision-makers often seek the informative trends, numbers and comparisons that quantitative methods can provide.

Qualitative and quantitative methods can be combined to create more effective assessments and analysis. Several tools even use qualitative methods to develop quantitative measures. Using both types of methods can yield comprehensive information that cannot be acquired by using any method alone.

Tools to assess empowerment explore agency, but most neglect structural causes of disempowerment

In a recent review (https://www.ifpri.org/publication/advancing-gender-equality-through-agricultural-and-environmental-research-past-present) Chapter 9 (https://www.ifpri.org/publication/assessing-womens-empowerment-agricultural-research) in *Advancing gender equality through agricultural and environmental research: Past, present, and future* (https://www.ifpri.org/publication/advancing-gender-equality-through-agricultural-and-environmental-research-past-present)), we, along with our colleagues Steven Cole (https://www.iita.org/iita-staff/cole-steven/), Agnes Quisumbing (https://www.ifpri.org/profile/agnes-quisumbing), Ana Maria Paez Valencia (https://www.worldagroforestry.org/staff/ana-maria-paez-valencia) and Jennifer Twyman (https://expertfinder.cgiar.org/display/msracad-1983379059), investigated 15 quantitative and qualitative tools used to assess women's empowerment.

We analyzed them based on which dimensions (resources, agency, achievements) and levels (individual, relational, environmental) of empowerment they examine, who they are meant to collect information from (local women, men and so on), whether they consider gender parity in empowerment, and whether they focus on the perspectives of those whose empowerment is being assessed ('emic' perspective) or of others/outsiders ('etic' perspective).

The tools roughly clustered into four groups (see Table 1 for more detail):

– Tools that measure one dimension of empowerment at one level – mainly agency as decision-making within the household: *5 Dimensions, WEI (IRRI)*

– Tools that focus on one dimension (agency), but at multiple levels, including attention to some structural/environmental reasons for (dis)empowerment: *Ladder of Power and Freedom, WDI-GAI*

– Tools that measure empowerment across more than one – but not all – dimensions and levels: *A-WEAI, GEI-CSV, Pro-WEAI, WEAI, WEFI, WEI (CARE), WEI-(Oxfam), WELI, Empowerment profiles*

– Tools that explore all dimensions of empowerment at all levels: *GIMT, Well-being timelines*

When selecting a tool, researchers need to consider their appropriateness, scope, limitations and adaptability, as well as how data collected using the tool will be competently interpreted.

Table 1: After analyzing 15 quantitative and qualitative tools, we found they clustered roughly into four groups.

DIMENSIONS THAT THE TOOL FOCUSES ON	TOOLS
One dimension of empowerment at one level – mainly agency as decision-making within the household	Comparison of the Five Dimensions of Men's and Women's Empowerment (https://www.slideshare.net/CGIAR/validating-gender-in-value-chains-tools-the-case-of-the-pmca) (5 Dimensions) IRRI's Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.03.011)
One dimension (agency), but at multiple levels, including attention to some structural/environmental reasons for (dis)empowerment	Ladder of Power and Freedom (https://hdl.handle.net/10883/19343) Women's Decision-Making Index and Gender Attitudes Index (WDI–GAI) (http://ebrary.ifpri.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15738coll2/id/133033)
More than one – but not all – dimensions and levels	Ladder of Power and Freedom (https://hdl.handle.net/10883/19343) Empowerment profiles (https://ideas.repec.org/p/erg/wpaper/1198.html) CARE's Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) (https://www.fsnnetwork.org/resource/designing-common-gender-indicator-framework-cares-pathways-program) Oxfam's Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) (https://doi.org/10.1080/19439342.2017.1377750) Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.06.007) Abbreviated-WEAI (A-WEAI) (http://ebrary.ifpri.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15738coll2/id/129719) Project level-WEAI (pro-WEAI) (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.06.018)

	Women's Empowerment in Livestock Index (WELI) (https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-018-1934-z)
	Women's Empowerment in Fisheries Index (WEFI) (https://doi.org/10.1080/09718524.2020.1729480)
	Gender Empowerment Index for Climate-Smart Villages (GEI–CSV) (https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-018-2321-0)
All dimensions of empowerment at all levels	Gender Indicator Monitoring Tool (https://www.fsnnetwork.org/resource/designing-common-gender-indicator-framework-cares-pathways-program) (GIMT)
	Life histories and well-being timelines (https://hdl.handle.net/10883/19343)

Empowerment means focusing on women's capacities to make choices instead of their agricultural productivity

Despite much effort and many advances in how we measure women's empowerment, there is still much progress to be made.

– Many times, programs seek to support women's empowerment assuming that it will lead to better agricultural production (http://www.fao.org/3/i2050e/i2050e00.htm). However, that may not always be the case. Efforts to support empowerment should recognize the value of empowerment in its own right, and not only as a means to achieving other desirable outcomes.

– Agriculture may not always be an empowering pursuit. Empowerment depends on women's aspirations, which will sometimes include exiting agriculture.

– Because empowerment challenges (https://www.jstor.org/stable/1395556) power structures, it can create resistance among those (a spouse, for example) who feel they are losing power (https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(02)08357-5). This can create backlash, such as in the form of gender-based violence, which may appear as ineffectiveness on behalf of the projects or programs supporting empowerment. Measures of empowerment must be able to detect such situations, where advances in some dimensions of empowerment lead to setbacks in others.

– Decision-making is sometimes shared among spouses or family members, and individuals may not wish to be involved in some types of decisions. As such, the link between autonomy over decision-making and empowerment is not always straightforward. Assessments of empowerment should seek to capture the nuances of decision-making, and not assume that women's independent decision-making necessary indicates empowerment.

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