Annotated Bibliography on measuring women’s empowerment


The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) measures the empowerment, agency, and inclusion of women in the agricultural sector and comprises two sub-indexes. The first assesses empowerment of women in five domains, including (1) decisions about agricultural production, (2) access to and decision-making power about productive resources, (3) control of use of income, (4) leadership in the community, and (5) time allocation. The second sub-index measures the percentage of women whose achievements are at least as high as men in their households and, for women lacking parity, the relative empowerment gap with respect to the male in their household. This article documents the development of the WEAI and presents pilot findings from Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Uganda.


The role of family context in determining women's agency has been addressed through kinship patterns, household structure, and domestic violence. This study suggests that another aspect of family context—family relationship quality—can also influence women's agency. Data from the Women’s Reproductive Histories Survey, collected in Madhya Pradesh, India, are used to examine whether family relationship quality is a determinant of women's agency. Results show that women with higher quality relationships with husbands and parents-in-law do have greater agency. Further, family relationship quality is just as influential as other well-known determinants of agency, including education and employment.


The article explores the way certain gender myths are being used to convert women into instruments of both the neo-liberal and fundamentalist agendas in India. One of such myth—that giving poor women access to economic resources leads to their overall empowerment—is analysed in the context of a government-initiated rural poverty alleviation programme in Southern India. It is argued that the women's political agency has been reduced to the privilege of being agents, consumers and beneficiaries of state-controlled credit and micro-enterprise programmes, with no other investment in improving the condition of their daily lives. The case study reveals how the imperatives of credit delivery may eclipse the long-term objectives of social change.


The article discusses the concept of women's empowerment from its origin in the 1980s to having become a mainstream development concern. It highlights how much of the narrative
focuses on instrumental gains—what women can do for development rather than what
development can do for women. In this perspective, empowerment is treated as a
destination reached through development's equivalent of motorways: programmes rolled
out over any terrain. But in the process, pathways women are travelling in their own
individual or collective journeys of empowerment remain hidden. By revisiting foundational
feminist work on empowerment, this article draws on findings from multi-country research
programme, Pathways of Women's Empowerment, to explore what works to support these
journeys.

➢ Doss, C., Meinzen-Dick, R., Quisumbing, A., & S. Theis (2018). "Women in Agriculture:

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG) on gender equality and women's rights and at least 11
of the 17 SDGs require indicators related to gender dynamics. Despite the need for reliable
indicators, stylized facts on women, agriculture, and the environment persist. This paper
analyses four gender myths: 1) 70% of the world's poor are women; 2) Women produce 60 to
80% of the world's food; 3) Women own 1% of the world's land; and 4) Women are better
stewards of the environment. After reviewing the conceptual and empirical literature, the
article presents the kernel of truth underlying each myth, questions its underlying
assumptions and implications, and examines how it hinders the development and
implementation of effective food security policies.

➢ Eyben, R., Kabeer, N. & A. Cornwall (2008). *Conceptualising Empowerment and the
Implications for Pro-Poor Growth: A Paper for the DAC Poverty Network*. Brighton UK:
Institute of Development Studies.

The article proposes a framework for how empowerment can be conceptually understood
and operationally explored. It privileges and appreciates a definition of empowerment as a
path rather than a building, through which donors can strengthen their capacity for
supporting pro-poor growth agenda. In particular, the article identifies three themes for
donor staff learning: (a) empowerment is context-specific; (b) empowerment is not
necessarily predictable and may take a long time; and (c) donors need to be aware of the
effects of power in their relations with others.

and Women's Empowerment in Southern Ethiopia. *Cogent Food &

The article argues that while the integration of gender in the scaling up of pilot projects has
the potential to empower women, care should be taken not to overly focus on a segment of
the women category (particularly female heads of households) and overstate temporary
gender gains that do not transform exploitative gender norms and practices. Drawing on
evaluation research undertaken by researchers of the Scaling-up of Pulse Innovation for Food
and Nutrition Security (SPIFoNS) Project, implemented in Southern Ethiopia, the article
highlights the need for the development of multidimensional programs that can help both
married women and female heads of households to gain full access to resources and
participate in important household decision-making processes.


Using a contextualized mixed methods approach, the authors measure empowerment processes unfolding across Maasai villages in northern Tanzania as related to the interventions of two innovative grassroots NGOs. The study draws from qualitative and quantitative data collected over a four-year period (2009-13) as well as over a decade of ethnographic engagements with the communities by the lead author. The results indicate increased personal agency in the household and increased political participation at the societal level as related to NGO involvement. Moreover, links between increased personal agency and changes in beliefs regarding gender norms at the societal level are revealed.


This manual discusses how the WEAI can be operationalized in a field setting based on experience of incorporating the index within a larger household survey rolled out in the Chandrapur District of Maharashtra in 2013-14 that focused on the links between women’s empowerment in agriculture and their iron deficiency status. This was the first time that the WEAI was applied in a field setting in India. The manual demonstrates how the WEAI can be adapted according to context-specific characteristics and highlights the inputs required for, and challenges faced during, the design and implementation of the index.


While central notions around agency are well established in academic literature, progress on the empirical front has faced major challenges around developing tractable measures and data availability. This has resulted in a limited understanding about patterns of agency and empowerment of women across countries. The article argues that, although complex, measuring key dimensions of women's agency and empowerment remains important and should be achieved through feasible methodology. In particular, it systematically explores for the first time what can be learned from Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data for fifty-eight countries, representing almost 80 percent of the female population of developing countries.

The project-level Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI) is being developed to address the need for an instrument that is sensitive to changes in empowerment over the duration of an intervention. The pro-WEAI includes new modules with previously untested survey questions, including a health and nutrition module (focused on women’s agency in this area) and an intrahousehold relationships module. This study was conducted in Bangladesh and uses cognitive interviewing to: (a) identify difficulties with interpretation and response formulation; (b) explore how new survey questions might be misinterpreted; (c) understand what experiences women are referencing when they respond to these questions; and ultimately, (d) inform revision to the existing modules.


The study evaluates the cognitive validity of questions used in the WEAI using cognitive interview data collected during the fielding of the 2012 Haiti Multi-Sectoral Baseline Survey. Findings indicate that overall, the questions on the WEAI were generally well-understood. However, the cognitive assessment helps discern areas of particular concern in terms of the ability of the WEAI questions to elicit valid responses from survey participants. Specific approaches to addressing observed difficulties are recommended; for example, avoiding the use of jargon and overly formal language, standardizing questions, and incorporating cognitive testing to ensure a valid and locally relevant instrument.


This study shows how poor people in Bangladesh are working together in a social movement to achieve a better life for themselves. It provides a valuable example of how empowerment, as a key prerequisite for social change and development, is measured and accounted for by the people closest to these change processes, and used by them for future work. This is done by participatory assessments which empower and transform relationships—participatory rural appraisal (PRA) approaches, drama, storytelling, songs, picture making, conversations and debate. At the same time, reliable and valid statistics are generated for what are typically thought to be only qualitative dimensions. A final section provides step by step guidance for replicating this approach in other programmes.


The article holds the view that women's empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability. This perspective widely differs from the more instrumentalist forms of advocacy which require the measurement and quantification of empowerment. The ability to exercise choice incorporates three interrelated dimensions: resources (material, human, and social); agency (decision-making as well as less measurable manifestations such as negotiation, deception,
and manipulation); and achievements (well-being outcomes). A number of studies are analysed to make some important methodological points in an attempt to incorporate the structural parameters of individual choice in the analysis of women's empowerment.


The article discusses the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on gender equality and women's empowerment. It highlights ways in which the indicators associated with this Goal (education, employment, and political participation) can contribute to it. Specifically, the focus is on transformative forms of agency that do not simply address immediate inequalities but are used to initiate longer-term processes of change in the structures of patriarchy. An argument is made that unless provision is made to ensure that policy changes are implemented in ways that allow women themselves to participate, to monitor, and to hold policy makers, corporations, and other relevant actors accountable for their actions, this potential is unlikely to be realised.


Different understandings and definitions of 'empowerment' abound, and the contested nature of the concept makes it challenging both to define and to measure, with the added complexity that different measurement approaches can themselves serve to strengthen or undermine empowerment. By providing practical examples derived from five years of experience, the article shares Oxfam GB's experience of developing a measurement tool based on a composite index (the Women's Empowerment Index) which builds on experience and tools from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI). This practical guide is meant to give support to other evaluators and practitioners in making use of the measurement tools presented here as guiding instruments that can be tailored to their needs and to each individual context.


The article measures empowerment in a sample of 3500 rural women in 128 villages of Bangladesh where an NGO health and microcredit experimental study was conducted. A conceptual framework is presented, together with descriptive data on the indicators (self-esteem, role in decision-making, freedom of mobility, and control of resources). Findings show that a woman's exposure to television is a significant predictor of three of the five indicators; that a woman's years of schooling is significantly associated with one of two self-esteem indicators and with freedom of mobility; and that household wealth has a significant and positive association with a woman's resource control but a significant negative association with her total decision-making score.

This instructional guide was written by researchers from IFPRI with input from USAID and OPHI to assist practitioners in implementing the A-WEAI. It is intended as a guidance piece that points out the most critical issues for consideration and good practices in the survey design, data collection, calculation, and analysis of the A-WEAI. This version of the guide has been updated from the original version (published in 2013) to reflect the changes made to the original version of the WEAI. Part A covers issues related to survey design and data collection; Part B provides details on how the indicators are defined; and Part C provides guidance on how the A-WEAI results can be presented, analysed, and interpreted.


The purpose of cognitive interviewing is to systematically identify and analyse sources of response error in surveys, and to use that information to improve the quality and accuracy of survey instruments. This article describes the cognitive interviews undertaken in Bangladesh and Uganda in 2014 as part of the second round of pilots intended to refine the original version of the Women’s Empowerment in Agricultural Index (WEAI). Problems have in fact been frequently reported by implementers in relation to this tool, such as confusion among both respondents and enumerators regarding the meaning of abstract concepts, and difficulties recalling the sequence and duration of activities in certain modules of the survey.


The Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), which has been widely used, requires adaptation to meet the need for monitoring projects and assessing their impacts. The article describes the adaptation and validation of a project-level WEAI (or pro-WEAI). Pro-WEAI was developed collaboratively with 13 agricultural development projects in Africa and South Asia as part of the Gender, Agriculture, and Assets Project, Phase 2 (GAAP2). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected to develop and validate pro-WEAI. Pro-WEAI presents 12 indicators mapped to three domains: intrinsic agency (power within), instrumental agency (power to), and collective agency (power with).


Despite extensive literature on the complex nature of empowerment, current efforts to measure women's empowerment in the agricultural development sector are largely limited to assessing visible forms of agency. By examining the results of a household survey conducted in Nepal using the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), the article...
tackles a critical look at current efforts to measure women's empowerment at the individual/household level through standardized tools. Such an approach is confronted with alternative results achieved through qualitative fieldwork conducted in the same region. Qualitative findings reveal that there is a discrepancy between local meanings of empowerment and approaches to empowerment that measure power predominantly in terms of agency.


Situating its argument in a perspective upon peacebuilding, this article examines how orthodox ideas of empowerment have changed for women living in contexts of insecurity. Drawing on fieldwork interviews on women, peace and security in Fiji, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste, key changes in thinking on empowerment in scholarship and policy are traced. The interview material raises new questions about the centrality of security to many women’s concepts of empowerment. By revealing a range of culturally different ideas on empowerment that emphasize the community, the article ultimately supports the capabilities approach to agency as fundamental to a transformative empowerment that challenges insecurities and gendered inequalities in culturally meaningful ways.


The article identifies poor measurement of women's empowerment as a major obstacle to current research efforts; however, a discussion of specific steps researchers can take to improve upon common measurement practices is lacking. The article provides quantitative researchers recommendations to measure women's empowerment in a theory-based, precise, and comprehensive way. It critically reviews key theoretical concepts of women’s empowerment as well as common measurement approaches. Recommendations for measuring empowerment and specific suggestions to meet these recommendations are discussed; including the selection of analytic methods that minimize implicit judgments and bias, and the combination of quantitative measures with qualitative interviews.


Based on findings from a study in three villages in Bangladesh where the authors have been conducting research since 1991, the article explores the salience of indicators developed for a 1992 survey and therefore the changing dimensions of women’s empowerment over time. This is the first published study in which a set of empowerment indicators was qualitatively re-validated some years after development, and accordingly updated. The argument is that the meanings and salience of empowerment indicators are likely to evolve over time, and that these changes too should be taken into account, both in developing interventions to foster women's empowerment and in documenting empowerment processes.
One of the most common quantitative indicators of women's empowerment is the self-reported ability to participate in household decision-making over important matters. Despite the widespread use of such indicators in the literature, uncertainty exists over how to construct valid indicators of empowerment based on questions about decision-making. The article utilizes data from women and men in Bangladesh and Ghana to investigate whether respondents who report sole decision-making in a particular domain tend to experience stronger or weaker feelings of autonomous motivation—measured using a Relative Autonomy Index—than those who report joint decision-making. The findings suggest that in order to accurately measure empowerment, further innovation in the specificity as well as the sensitivity of indicators is needed.

Increasing women's voice and agency is widely recognized as a key strategy to reduce gender inequalities and improve health outcomes. Although recent studies have found associations between women's autonomy and a number of health outcomes, fundamental issues regarding adequate measurement of women's autonomy remain. The Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) provides a direct measure of motivational autonomy. This article examines the measurement properties and added value of a number of domain specific RAIs using new nationally representative data from The Republic of Chad. A striking finding is that women on average have less autonomous motivation in all eight domains compared to their male counterparts.