

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT



## MEASURING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Measuring women's empowerment involves assessing their ability to make choices, the resources they have, & their achievements. Typical measurement approaches can be grouped into several categories:

- 1) **Economic indicators** – access to and control over productive resources like income, land, and other assets
- 2) **Educational indicators** – access to education, training and extension services, access to information
- 3) **Social and cultural indicators** – participation in social networks and organisations, freedom of movement
- 4) **Political and legal indicators** – participation in local governance and committees
- 5) **Health and wellbeing indicators** – access to healthcare and nutrition
- 6) **Time use and labour indicators** – workload and time allocation, gendered-division of labour
- 7) **Psychological indicators** – self-confidence, sense of agency

## WHAT IS WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT?

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5) aims to 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. But what does empowerment mean and look like across different contexts, and how do we work towards it?

The most widely accepted definition of women's empowerment is "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 1999).

Women's empowerment can be thought of as a process occurring over time by which women define goals and increase their ability to make life choices and desired outcomes. It therefore links closely to the concept of aspirations – where it is important to understand the differentiated goals, choices and outcomes of women across different groups and locations.

### DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

Typical approaches to women's empowerment focus on promoting women's sense of self-worth, her ability to determine her own choices, and her right to influence social change for herself and others.

They often promote women taking a more active role in decision-making – both in the household and in community and market spaces. Promoting women's participation in groups and in politics – particularly within leadership roles – is another key focus within development approaches to women's empowerment. However, women's empowerment is a complex concept that can mean different things to different people, and varies according to location and cultural context. This means it is difficult to define and measure – and practitioners need to be wary of imposing their own assumptions as to what empowerment means and looks like.

# EMPOWERMENT ASSUMPTIONS: UNDERSTANDING AND CAPTURING LOCAL EXPERIENCES

## CONCEPTUALISATION ASSUMPTIONS

Empowerment is dynamic and contextual. Conceptually, many empowerment frameworks focus on the individual – overlooking the importance of community solidarity, collective action, and mutual support.

Many conceptualisations of women's empowerment are rooted in Western notions of individualism, independence and autonomy. These values may not be applicable to non-Western cultures where there are different community and gender norms.

There is often an over emphasis on economic empowerment – such as income generation and access to financial resources – at the expense of other dimensions of empowerment. Economic power does not necessarily translate into agency or decision-making power.

## MEASUREMENT ASSUMPTIONS

Assuming that empowerment is measurable or quantifiable necessitates a definition of empowerment and its values to measure against. However, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to fully capture the nuances of women's empowerment across different cultural and geographical contexts. Local definitions and perceptions of empowerment can differ widely.

As empowerment is a **process**, measurements at best capture a snapshot – they do not capture changes over time.

In addition, a focus on individual and household-level data may not fully capture power dynamics and gender relations within extended families or communal living situations.

## UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENCE

Women are not a homogeneous group. They have different values, desires and barriers which shape their experience of empowerment. Factors such as ethnicity, age, religion & marital status also intersect to shape these experiences.

'Power' is not something that women 'gain' or 'lose'. It exists and operates within relationships. It is dynamic, contested and can operate in subtle ways. There are multiple forms of power – reflecting different dimensions of how individuals/groups exercise agency.

'Empowerment' also takes time – short-term investments may not lead to any observable or measurable changes. For sustained empowerment, we need to look at longer-term, structural changes.

## FOSTA-HEALTH RESEARCH

FoSTA-Health has been exploring understandings and experiences of empowerment across Tanga Region, Tanzania. Some initial findings:

- Female smallholders largely understand empowerment as receiving loans – often through groups. Empowerment in this way is viewed as something they receive from the government and development organisations. However this raises challenges for how women experience empowerment:
  - Women's access to groups can be limited by lack of money and their relationships with husbands, and the groups don't always work as intended (see briefing note 4). Additionally, high-interest loans can be hard to repay, leading to conflicts in both the group and at home. This makes empowerment challenging to implement and receive.
- Some women view empowerment as economic independence – but not all. Other women want to share the household income with their partners, and to sit down and decide together on its use.
- Some women also view empowerment as education – in agriculture, and in understanding their rights. This training can, however, influence their understanding of empowerment.
- In sum, empowerment is understood differently by different women.

## UNDERSTANDING POWER AND AGENCY

**Intrinsic agency** (power within): reflects a person's internal voice, self respect or self-confidence

**Instrumental agency** (power to): captures a person's ability to make decisions in their own best interest, e.g. control over income/assets or decisions over financial services

**Collective agency** (power with): power from acting together with others – e.g. through groups

But empowerment work needs to challenge more than just 'men have power over women'. **Structural power** is embedded in social, political and economic systems, and shapes who has access to resources, opportunities and rights and who does not.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Take time to sit with communities to listen to & understand what empowerment means to them. This will help to ensure that project aims align to community values & needs, & to the co-design of appropriate measurement approaches.
- Appreciate that empowerment may be understood and experienced by different people in different ways. Project design, implementation and monitoring therefore needs to reflect these different values.
- Remember that because empowerment is a process, these tools may need to be adjusted throughout project lifecycles.
- Consider how participatory methodologies might be applied to support capacity building and empowerment and to lead to sustainable outcomes.



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