

**A LITERATURE REVIEW ON
THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

by

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A paper presented to the faculty of The University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Public Health
in the Department of Maternal and Child Health.

Chapel Hill, N.C.

April 18, 2011

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ABSTRACT

This literature review starts out by discussing the relevancy of women's empowerment as an approach to address gender inequality in societies. It then goes on to illustrate three strong models of women's empowerment in contemporary development literature, breaking down the process by fundamental concepts and phases. The frameworks serve to educate development actors on how to better measure the process and identify programs and policies that promote the empowerment approach. After looking at the frameworks, the review addresses key measurement considerations, such as dimensions of women's empowerment and levels of data aggregation, as well as cross-cultural concerns in utilizing a universal empowerment approach.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender is a social construct that defines what it means to be a man or a woman in a given society. Gender often prescribes roles for men and women, dealing with division of labor, responsibilities and rights. These roles vary by culture and may change over time. (1) In societies, gender structures have the potential to produce institutionalized inequalities between men and women (12) (i.e. gender inequality). In these contexts, women are often more susceptible to and are disproportionately effected by these inequalities. (1) One approach to challenge gender inequality is through women gaining power through a process of women's empowerment. (12) Empowerment is understood as transformatory in that it has the potential to challenge societal inequities, such as conditions rooted in gender inequality. (8)

Over the last couple decades, the international development community has increasingly focused its efforts on promoting gender equality as a means to better social, economic and health outcomes, but also as an end in itself. (19) In 2000, development leaders gathered at the United Nations headquarters in New York to develop goals to reduce poverty by 2015. These eight goals, known as the Millennium Development Goals, guide international development actors on strategy and project goals. Goal three is to "promote gender equality and empower women." (18)

Additionally, in 2010, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was re-branded as the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) (17). The intention behind this was to make

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the organization a more independent and well-resourced agency. (5) The World Bank is also an advocate for women's empowerment. In their *Gender Action Plan*, women's economic empowerment is prioritized as a main objective (20) and has been included in over 1,800 World Bank-aided projects. (12) The World Bank asserts that investing in women unleashes economic potential and is good for economic growth and poverty reduction. (5)

Women's empowerment is promoted for economic rationales as well as a means to achieve positive health outcomes for women and children. Demographers have noted that changes in gender systems, such as women's empowerment, can bring about demographic change, specifically with regards to fertility and mortality. (12) International program evidence supports that empowerment does in fact lead to positive reproductive health outcomes. Rigorous evaluations of empowerment programs, such as the BRAC microcredit program in Bangladesh (15), Ishraq ("Englightenment") program in Egypt, and the South African Intervention with Microfinance for AIDS and Gender Equity (IMAGE) (19), provide such evidence.

The evaluation of the BRAC program found that expanding a woman's economic choices through microcredit was associated with increased contraceptive use as well as higher levels of women's empowerment, measured by physical mobility, economic security, autonomous decision-making, exposure to violence, political and legal awareness, and political participation. (15)

The Ishraq program provided literacy classes, life-skills and livelihood trainings, and physical activity to promote social networks and individual self-confidence. The program contributed to a decline in support for violence against

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women, including female genital cutting, as well as to a reduction in child marriage. Thus, the program's efforts to promote women's empowerment contributed to more gender-equitable attitudes, as well as healthier fertility behaviors. (19)

And lastly, the IMAGE program in South Africa incorporated a micro-lending component and a life skills program to advance gender and HIV awareness. The program decreased intimate partner-violence, which is linked to HIV/AIDS status, and increased women's economic well-being and empowerment, measured by self-confidence and financial confidence, attitudes toward gender norms, autonomous decision-making, household communication, partner relationships, and participation in social groups, and collective action. (19) These evaluations demonstrate the potential women's empowerment can have for the health and well-being of women in developing countries.

While women's empowerment has been promoted as a central development issue (5), development actors do not always use the term appropriately, (3) let alone measure it accurately or consistently. Those seeking to promote women's empowerment or measure it, must first be familiar with how it is conceptualized by development academics and experienced professionals. This literature review serves to illustrate how academics and development professionals conceptualize and define women's empowerment in contemporary development literature and to highlight conceptual considerations for how the concept is measured and operationalized in programs.

DEFINING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

In women's empowerment literature, outdated academic theories and ideas still flourish in policy discourse. (5) Terms like autonomy, power, status, agency are used interchangeably with women's empowerment. (10) However, there are subtle differences that researchers, evaluators and programmers must acknowledge, such as the distinction between autonomy and empowerment. Autonomy signifies independence and is more of a static concept, whereas empowerment can include interdependence as well as and refers to a process. (11) Batliwala contends that "of all the buzzwords that have entered the development lexicon in the past 30 years, empowerment is probably the most widely used and abused." (3)

The concept of empowerment has historical foundations in several collective struggles for social justice, such as the Protestant Reformation, Quakerism, Jeffersonian democracy, capitalism, the black-power movement. In the mid-1980s, the notion of women's empowerment emerged as a way to challenge patriarchy. And, in the 1990s, the term was broadened from thinking of it as collective process to also understanding it as an individual process of self-transformation. (3)

At the 1995 Fourth World Conference in Beijing, women's empowerment was introduced to an expanded audience of state actors and governments. The signatories of the conference pledged to advance women's empowerment worldwide. (16) Their vision of women's empowerment stressed three main fundamentals:

- It was a socio-political process;
- Power was the critical to empowerment; and

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- The process promoted shifts in political, social, and economic power between and across individuals and groups. (3)

These fundamental notions of empowerment were incorporated into the growing literature on the conceptualization of women's empowerment.

CONCEPTUALIZING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

KABEER'S THREE DIMENSIONAL MODEL

One of the leading and frequently cited (4, 5, 12, 13, 15) conceptual thinkers on this topics is Nalia Kabeer, a DFID Senior Research Fellow who works on developing frameworks and methodologies for integrating gender concerns into policy and planning. (6) Kabeer defines power as the ability to make choices. Therefore, those who are disempowered are either denied or are limited in their choices. Empowerment is a process that gives power to the disempowered and increases their ability to make strategic choices. People who are able to make strategic life choices, but who were never disempowered, are merely powerful, not empowered. (7)

Kabeer's definition is parallel to the World Bank's understanding that empowerment enhances an "individual's or group's capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes." (10) Mason refers to this ability as making *effective* choices. (12) Empowerment is a process that occurs over time, making women agents who formulate choices, control resources, and make strategic life choices. (10)

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Thus, existence of viable choices to achieve desired outcomes is central to the concept of empowerment. In order for choice to exist, there must be a possibility of alternatives. One must perceive and be able to choose alternative options. Kabeer explains that some choices have greater significance in terms of consequences than other choices (7) and makes a distinction between first- and second-order choices. First order choices are strategic life choices that are critical to how we want our lives, such as the choice of livelihood, who/if to marry, whether to have children, etc. Second-order choices are often framed by first-order choices and are less consequential. They are important for life quality, but do not define life's parameters. (8) Kabeer also explains that exercising strategic choices should not limit one's ability to make future decisions. (7)

Kabeer outlines three dimensions of empowerment, explaining these are the pathways through which empowerment occurs. (7) The first of these three dimensions is resources, which can be understood as the conditions of choice, meaning one perceives and is able to choose alternative options, or as this referred to in Kabeer's diagram, pre-conditions. The second dimension is agency, which is a process by which one distinguishes between strategic life choices and second-order choices and makes choices in either arena. (8) Resources and agency are thought of as catalysts for empowerment. In some of the other literature, these terms are often referred to as control, awareness, or power. (11) And lastly, the third dimension is achievements, which refers to the consequences of the choices made. (8) Change in one dimension can lead to changes in the others. (7) These three dimensions can be seen as interacting in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Nalia Kabeer's Conceptual Framework of Women's Empowerment



Resources (pre-conditions)

Kabeer characterizes resources as material, human or social in form. Resources increase the ability to exercise choice (8) and are the means through which agency is carried out. They are attained by way of social institutions and relationships in society. When social institutions and relationships promote male authority and endorse gender inequality, women become limited, relative to men, in their abilities to access resources. (7)

Agency (process)

Having access to resources is a necessary pre-condition of empowerment, however access alone is different than having control. This is often the case in contexts where there is a gap between practice and the law, such as with property rights in many countries. For that reason, access to resources is not sufficient; women must also have the ability to identify and utilize those resources. (11) Kabeer refers to this as agency, explaining one has the *power within* to define one's own goals and act upon them. This is often operationalized through decision-making abilities. (8) How one sees itself (i.e. their sense of self-worth) is the foundation of empowerment. This is often reliant on how they are seen by others.

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While the self drives empowerment, societal values and norms often shape inequalities in society. (7)

Kabeer makes note of a few distinctions and nuances regarding agency. She distinguishes between *passive* and *active* agency, noting *passive* agency is when an action is taken under circumstances with few realizable options, whereas *active* agency refers to purposeful behavior. Kabeer also differentiates between agency that is *effective* and agency that is *transformative*. *Effective* agency provides women with greater efficiency in carrying out their roles, whereas *transformative* agency gives women the ability to challenge the restrictive nature of their roles. Transformative agency provides women with greater ability to consider and respond to the patriarchal constraints in their lives. (7)

Achievements (outcomes)

Kabeer depicts achievements as the extent to which one's capabilities (i.e. resources and agency) are realized. These can be understood as outcomes. (7) It is critical to note whether differences achievements are because of one's ability to challenge inequalities, rather than a difference in personal preference (8) or individual characteristics, such as laziness, where power is not an issue. (9)

Triangulating The Dimensions

The three dimensions described above make up Kabeer's conceptual understanding of empowerment. Kabeer argues they must be considered indivisible when it comes to developing meaningful and valid measures of empowerment. (8)

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The validity of each dimension measure is dependent upon others. Consequently, Kabeer makes a case for triangulating data from each dimension when constructing empowerment measures, explaining, "the more evidence there is to support these assumptions, the more faith we are likely to have in the validity of the indicator in question." (8)

THE COMMISSION ON WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT'S CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Belgium's governmental international aid agency, the Direction-Générale de la Coopération au Développement (DGCD), tasked the Commission on Women and Development to design an empowerment methodology to be used for program development. In doing so, they were first faced with conceptualizing the term. The Commission's conception was influenced by Kabeer, as well as other theorists¹ and the DAWN women's movement (4); however there are subtle nuances and additional insights that make this model valuable to examine.

The guide describes empowerment as providing greater control of resources, increasing one's own power and introducing more socio-political spaces. Empowerment occurs at two levels: the individual and the collective level. At the individual level, one acquires greater independence, enhances capacity for self-determination, and increases opportunities. At the collective level, groups increase their abilities to influence social change. However, this model primarily highlights the individual aspects of empowerment. (4)

¹ Sarah Longwez, Jo Rowlands and Magdalena Léon

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Core Concepts

This model identifies four core concepts of empowerment - *assets*, *knowledge*, *will*, and *capacity* – and argues that they are useful when assessing the outcomes and impact of empowerment programs. This breakdown is similar to Kabeer's model, but not identical. One noticeable nuance is that this model splits Kabeer's *resources* into two separate concepts – *assets* and *knowledge*. *Assets* are defined as the material resources that give one greater economic power. These include income, land, tools, technology, better health, more time, access to services, information and training, health centers and markets etc. *Knowledge* provides people with techniques, training, literacy, and critical analysis skills. It promotes leadership and enables an individual or a community to take advantage of opportunities. (4)

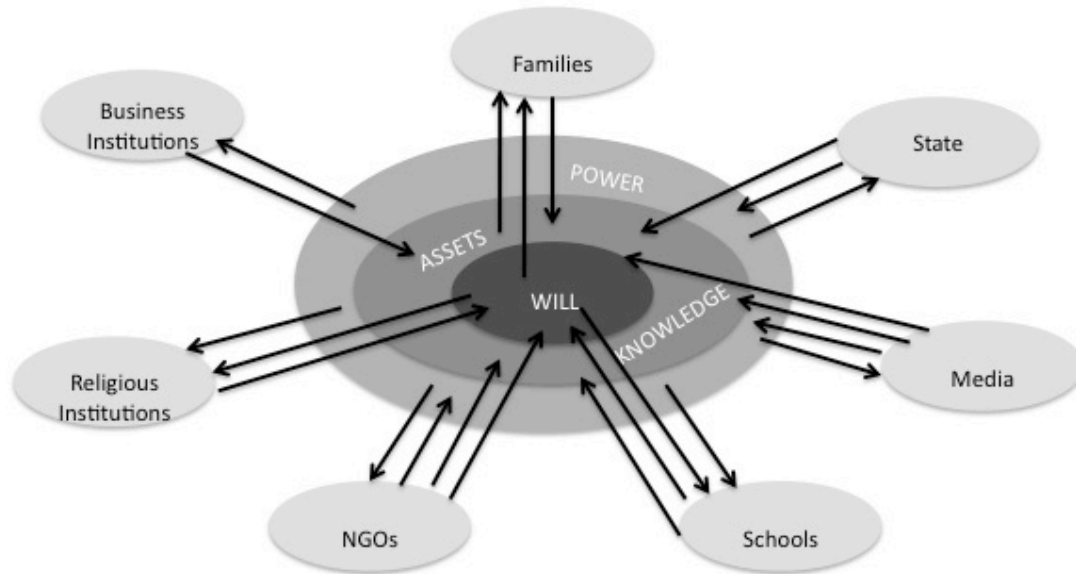
Will is the third dimension listed in this model. It is defined as the psychological strength or the power within to make one's own choices. This is quite similar to Kabeer's agency; however this model categorizes *will* as a resource. The guide also explains that one's values, fears, self-confidence and self-perception affect one's *will*. The fourth dimension the guide discusses is *capacity*, which is described as having the opportunities to use resources (assets, knowledge, will), make decisions, and take on responsibility. (4) Decision-making may be helpful in operationalizing *capacity*.

Figure 2 illustrates how the empowerment process can be a catalyst for social change. It depicts will, assets and knowledge – all concepts Kabeer refers to as resources – in concentric circles surrounded by power. It also illustrates the

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institutional context (family, the State, religious establishments, educational establishments, the media, NGOs, etc.) in which an individual or a group resides. Institutions have the potential to affect *will*, *assets* and/or *knowledge* and visa versa, as illustrated by the arrows pointing in- and outward. One's capacity for empowerment is linked to the institutions and laws in society. However, it is important to note that not all of these arrows are the same in weight and that the model is limited in that not all relationships of influence are shown. (4)

Figure 2. Commission Women and Development Model



Power

Power is another critical element of the empowerment process. The guide delineates different ways in which individuals and groups yield power. The first is having *power over* someone, which implies power is limited. The second is the *power to* make decisions and solve problems. This is related to *assets* and *knowledge*, suggesting that this type of power utilizes those resources. The third is

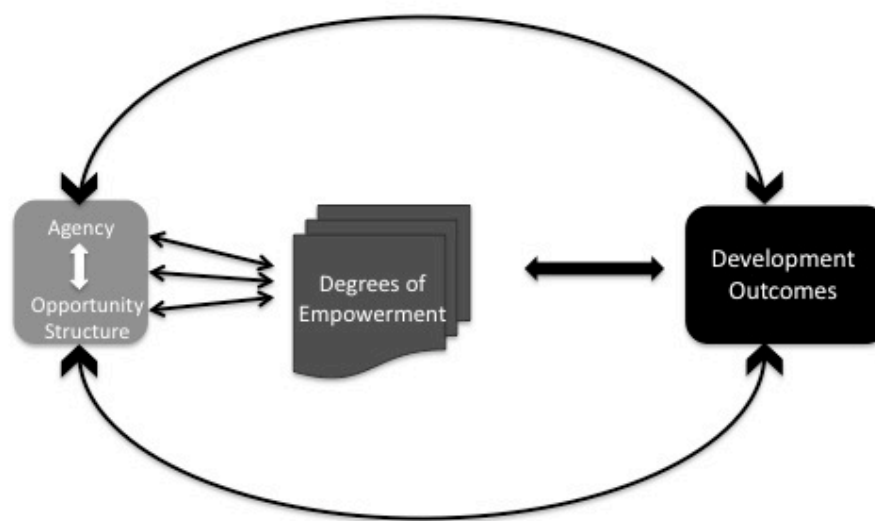
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the *power with* others, referring to the power one has in the social and political spheres. Thus, there is power in collectivity, whereby having a common purpose and the ability to gather are pre-requisites. This is linked to the *capacity* dimension discussed above. And lastly, as discussed above, *power within* is another aspect, which refers to one's identity and assertiveness. (4) It enables individuals to influence their own lives, and thus, is associated with the *will* and *capacity* concepts.

THE WORLD BANK'S AGENCY & OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE MODEL

The last framework that is included in this review is one presented by authors, Ruth Alsop & Nina Heinsohn, under the direction of the World Bank. The model, as shown in Figure 3, highlights *agency* and *opportunity structure* as the two main factors contributing to empowerment. The capacity to make effective choices is dependent on these two concepts. (2)

Figure 3. World Bank's Model



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Similar to the previous models, *agency* is one's capacity to make meaningful and purposive choices. However, in this model the authors suggest that assets are indicators of agency, whereas the previous two models depict assets as a pre-condition for agency. Assets are characterized as psychological, informational, organizational, material, social, financial, or human in nature, making some assets are harder to measure than others. For example, it is harder to quantify psychological assets (e.g. capacity to envision) and social assets (e.g. social capital) than it is to measure human assets (e.g. knowledge, literacy, etc.). Therefore, a mixed-method data collection is recommended here for measurement. (2)

The other pre-condition in this model is the *opportunity structure*. The authors define *opportunity structure* as the informal and formal institutions in which the individuals and the groups partake. These include laws, regulatory frameworks, and norms governing behavior, arguing that the opportunity structure determines who has access to assets and whether they can use their assets. Therefore, any measurement of this element needs to look at how formal and informal institutions operate in society. (2)

These authors hypothesize that *agency* and *opportunity structure* are associated with the degrees of empowerment individuals and groups enjoy. The authors contend that there are different degrees of empowerment and suggest that these degrees can be measured by "the existence of choice, the use of choice, and the achievement of choice." (2) This is very similar to Kabeer's conceptualization, but by using the word degree, this model further emphasizes the necessity for pre-

A literature Review on the Conceptualization of Women's Empowerment conditions and the progressive nature of empowerment. Therefore, changes in assets or the opportunity structure will influence the degree to which one is empowered. The authors reveal that these degrees of empowerment will in turn influence development outcomes. (2)

THE INFLUENCE OF POVERTY AND GENDER NORMS

While empowerment is a constructive approach for addressing gender inequalities in society and enabling women to achieve desired outcomes, it is essential to realize other factors that may inhibit or hinder this process. Gender inequalities are often exacerbated by additional factors that limit women's power. These factors may include class or caste, ethnicity, wealth, age and cultural values. (14)

Poverty, in particular, is one factor that needs to be greatly considered, especially in developing country contexts. An essential element of empowerment is the ability to realize alternative choices. When people are impoverished, they are unable to meet their basic needs, and therefore, often lack the means or resources to do so. Additionally, in societies where gender inequality is heightened, poverty impacts women disproportionately, making it harder for women to embark on the empowerment process. (7)

Another critical factor to consider is the gender norms of the society. In many cultures, gender roles are often entrenched and accepted as an uncompromising reality or God-given. (14) Cultural values may even deny that such

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inequalities exist or that they are unjust. In such a context, women in subordinate roles are likely to accept their positions and not question those in power. (7) That is why in some societies, women do not question their secondary claims to household resources or their exposure to violence, thereby, undermining their own wellbeing.

Some may argue that this kind of acceptance reflects their choice, however, Kabeer explains that it is important to not just look at agency and choice, but also the kind of choices women make, as some choices serve to reinforce women's subordinate and often powerless roles. Power over someone cannot only happen through coercion and force, but it can also happen through consent and complicity. (8) Therefore, in looking at women's empowerment, it is essential to look at gender relations and how power relations between the men and women are constructed and reproduced. (14)

It is also necessary to look at the normative structures in which gender operates. Not only do individuals and groups need to realize their power, but they also need to confront the ideological systems in which their lives take place. (13) Kabeer notes that in societies where family and togetherness are dominant values, gender roles may be more narrowly defined and household resources are often controlled by the male head. Women may not seek out power or resources separate from their male counterpart, because it is not socially acceptable or personally desired. Instead, women may invest their efforts in strengthening the cooperative aspects of their marriage and family life. In these contexts, the empowerment approach may have less resonance. (8) Therefore, it is important to note that women's empowerment may differ by country and community based on the gender

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values of the society. Mason measured gender-role norms in India, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand by aggregating normative attitudes of women and found that the gender norms in those communities explain at least two-thirds of the community's variation in women's empowerment. (13)

When structural inequalities, such as gender, exist and constrain women's abilities to make strategic life choices, the individual women's empowerment approach may not be sufficient alone. Evidence has shown that individual women may go against societal norms, but their impact on gender equality will be limited and they may even have to make considerable sacrifices to exercise their newly recognized autonomy. One way to counteract this may be to focus empowerment efforts on the collective solidarity of women and utilize women's organizations, as well as social movements, to create conditions for change and reduce the costs women may have to pay for exercising their autonomy. (8) Additionally, empowerment efforts should target informal and private sectors relating to women's lives as well as the more public and formal settings. (7)

MEASUREMENT CONSIDERATIONS

LEVELS AND DIMENSIONS

Using the women's empowerment frameworks can be useful in starting to think about measurement, but it is also important to think about how the process of empowerment actually relates to the various areas of one's life. Malhotra et al. identify the following dimensions in which the empowerment process should be

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measured. These include psychological, familial/interpersonal, legal, political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions. One can become empowered in one or multiple spheres of life and women may be empowered within one sphere and not in another. (11) However, it is also possible that inequalities in one dimension may be reproduced in other dimensions. (7)

Additionally, Malhotra et al. note that measuring empowerment indicators in these various dimensions should happen at different levels of social aggregation, such as the household, community and broader areas (i.e. regional, national and global). (11) Alternative terminology to refer to the same levels of social aggregation, are the micro or local level, the intermediary level and the macro level. Mason explains that “a certain degree of empowerment at one level does not necessarily reflect the same degree of empowerment at other levels.” (12) The authors of the World Bank conceptual model argue that it is at the intersection of these dimensions and levels of aggregation, one can measure the extent to which a woman is empowered. This is reflected in their model showing how individuals experience different degrees of empowerment. (2)

Measuring at specific levels often serves one dimension better than another. For instance, within the political and legal dimensions, measuring indicators at higher levels of aggregation, such as regional or national, is more fitting; whereas within the familial/interpersonal, social, and economic dimensions, indicators are accumulated at the individual or household levels, and sometimes at the community level. Malhotra et al. note that one limitation of the past empowerment evaluations is that the psychological dimension is rarely operationalized at any level. They also

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observe that past studies are limited in using indicators at the intermediate or community level. Empowerment studies would benefit by looking at how shifts in norms, marriage systems, political processes in the community contribute to the process of women's empowerment and in doing so, focus on the collective action of women at the community level. (11)

MEASURING A PROCESS

Each conceptual understanding described above highlights the processional nature of empowerment. Past studies measuring empowerment aspects heavily use cross-sectional data, looking at indicators at a static point in time. Instead, studies should examine how experiences and resources accumulate and contribute to empowerment over time. Also, evaluators should look at how characteristics, such as age and marital status, change over time and how that affects women's empowerment capabilities. (10) Evaluations of empowerment are better off using time-series data to follow indicators across at least two points in time to capture the process. (11)

Proxy variables, such as decision-making and access to and control over resources, are often used to measure empowerment; however these variables are better proxies of the particular phases of empowerment. For example, decision-making is a strong proxy for agency, while access to and control resources are more enabling factors or preconditions. Therefore, it is critical that evaluators recognize when they are looking at such indicators, they are only really measuring one phase of the empowerment process. While such indicators are useful, evaluators should

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also use qualitative data to inform their studies, as the nature of empowerment is subjective and sometimes best expressed through narratives. (11)

CONCLUSION

The models of women's empowerment described in this review breakdown the process by concepts and phases. Additionally, they highlight the various ways in which power is exercised by individuals and groups and review the dimensions in which women's empowerment operates. The review also highlights how experienced empowerment researchers stress the importance of measuring indicators along a continuum using time-series data. And lastly, the literature reveals that it is important to address other factors that may impede the ability to measure the true effect of empowerment. (10) These are often contextual in nature and are determined by the institutional environment in which the individual or group resides.

The challenge from here is to develop valid and appropriate indicators that can be used in cross-contextual settings, as well as context specific (in terms of socioeconomic, cultural and political differences) indicators that reflect unique values and structures of a particular community. To some extent, universal indicators are useful in making regional comparisons with regard to power, women's status, gender equity and equality, but they may be inappropriate across all contexts. In view of that, Malhotra et al. argue that is why it is important to conceptualize women's empowerment consistently across evaluations in order to

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measure the effects of empowerment, but it is also necessary to define the key dimensions of the framework in contextually appropriate ways and develop context specific indicators that are meaningful to the community. The later is where evidenced-based empowerment studies are currently lacking. (11)

Another limitation of the current research on women's empowerment is that if focuses on women in marriages or partnerships and indicators largely measure relations between martial partners. (11) Future studies should develop appropriate indicators for unmarried women, as they too, are often exposed to gender inequality and the resulting negative health outcomes. This population would benefit greatly from empowerment programming and should be a consideration in women's empowerment funding schemes.

The models depicted above, in particular Kabeer's, are useful in breaking down empowerment as a process. Looking at indicators of the various components (resources, agency and achievements) can help development actors to better measure the process and identify programs and policies that promote the empowerment approach.

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