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Women's Empowerment in Agriculture:

Lessons from Qualitative Research

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Contents

Tables

Figures

ABSTRACT

There is growing recognition of the importance of women's empowerment in its own right and for a range of development outcomes, but less understanding of what empowerment means to rural women and men. The challenge of measuring empowerment, particularly across cultures and contexts, is also garnering attention. This paper synthesizes qualitative research conducted conjointly with quantitative surveys, working with eight agricultural development projects in eight countries, to develop a project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI). The qualitative research sought to identify emic meanings of "empowerment," validate the domains and indicators of the quantitative index, provide greater understanding of the context of each project and of strategies for facilitating empowerment, and test a methodology for integrating emic perspectives of empowerment with standardized etic measures that allow for comparability across contexts.

Despite challenges in translating the concept of "empowerment" across different cultures, the interviews revealed similarities among perceptions of women's empowerment across contexts. Interviews also revealed nuances that informed the development of pro-WEAI. Women's empowerment was often described in terms of achievements, rather than agency. Economic status was an important component, meaning that empowered women can take care of themselves, their families, and their communities. Women's empowerment was seen more positively when it was not just an individual attribute, but used to "lift the burden" of others. Both men and women reacted negatively to the notion of women having power over others, especially over men. Results also showed interconnections between different quantitative indicators of empowerment. Women's workloads and domestic responsibilities often limit their mobility and ability to earn income, two common measures of empowerment. Group membership can be empowering, but time and mobility mediate women's ability to participate in groups.

Such findings offer three critical insights. First, they reveal where conceptions of empowerment among researchers may diverge from those of rural women and men in different contexts, enabling future development programming and research to be more sensitive to the norms and beliefs shaping rural livelihoods to improve outcomes. Then, they provide projects with guidance on strategies that can contribute to women's empowerment, and allow them to interpret quantitative results of pro-WEAI. Finally, they shed light on the importance of qualitative research to provide rich contextual data for assessing empowerment, and a methodology that can be used in this pursuit.

Keywords: gender, Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index, qualitative research, indicators, emic perspectives

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

A-WEAI	Abbreviated Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index
AVC	Agriculture Value Chains
DAI	Development Alternatives Incorporated
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GAAP1	Gender, Agriculture, and Assets Project
GAAP2	Gender, Agriculture, and Assets Project, Phase 2
Heifer	Heifer Project International
iDE	International Development Enterprises
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
JP-RWEE	UN Joint Programme on accelerating progress towards the economic empowerment of rural women in Ethiopia
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OPHI	Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative
pro-WEAI	Project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WEAI	Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index
WorldVeg	World Vegetable Center

1. INTRODUCTION

The fifth Sustainable Development Goal, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030, broadens the focus of the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) to eliminate gender inequality in education (UN 2018a; UN 2018b). The United Nations (UN) development goals reflect the growing understanding of gender disparities and their ramifications in recent decades. Women's empowerment has been recognized as both important in its own right and instrumental in eliminating gender disparities and mitigating their negative outcomes—whether in health, agricultural productivity, or economic output. Since 2000, there has been considerable research and policy attention devoted to identifying the components of women's empowerment, how to measure it in various contexts, and how to facilitate women's empowerment in practice. Naila Kabeer's (1999:435) definition of empowerment as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" has influenced the design of various gender-sensitive development strategies (Mosedale 2005; Meinzen-Dick et al. 2011; Swain and Wallentin 2009; Bennett 2002; Malhotra and Schuler 2005). Kabeer further identifies three critical components of empowerment: resources (material, human, and social resources which are distributed through institutions and relationships in society), agency (ability to define and act on one's individual or shared goals), and achievements (well-being outcomes). As noted in Figure 1, resources facilitate agency, which leads to achievements; achievements, in turn, can contribute to resources (including human and social capital).

Figure 1: Components of empowerment identified by Kabeer (1999)
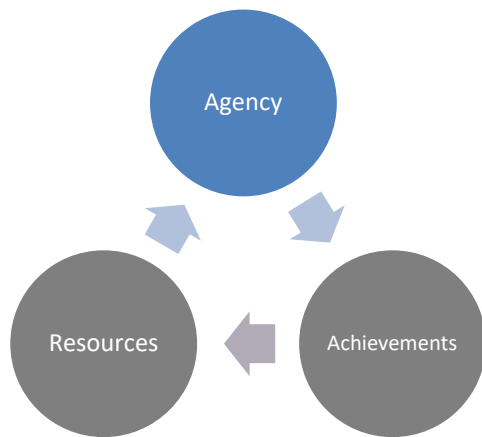
Source: Authors, based on Kabeer 1999

Despite this widely-accepted definition of empowerment, it has been challenging to operationalize the concept and develop ways of measuring it that are relevant to the local context but still comparable across locations and over time. How any person conceives of "empowerment" is both subjective and shaped by their social context, including participation in development projects.

Standardized measures often fail to capture aspects of empowerment that are important in particular contexts, but measures based only on local definitions are unlikely to be comparable, limiting the accumulation of comparative evidence on processes that contribute to, or constrain, empowerment. Of the three components of empowerment identified by Kabeer, recent years have seen great advances in developing sex-disaggregated measures of resources, such as assets and property rights (e.g., Deere and Doss 2006; Doss et al. 2011), and achievements in various areas such as productivity, income, health, and nutrition (e.g., O'Sullivan et al. 2014). However, measuring agency remains a challenge. Researchers have found that study participants express empowerment as achievements, especially having wealth, demonstrating how measuring agency is difficult because it is not readily conceptualized by study participants (e.g. Bonilla et al. 2017).

The work of Rowlands (1995, 1997) offers insights into operationalizing agency by thinking about different types of power. She contrasts conventional notions of "power over" (dominating others) with

"power to" (enacting personal goals), "power with" (acting collectively toward shared interests), and "power within" (internalized power derived from self-respect, self-efficacy and awareness of rights). Empowerment can then be classified as strengthening one or more of these types of power (Miedema et al. 2018), but "power over" carries negative and coercive connotations:

> "When power is defined as 'power over', then if women gain power it will be at men's expense. It is easy to see why the notion of women becoming empowered is seen as inherently threatening, the assumption being that there will be some kind of reversal of relationships, and men will not only lose power but also face the possibility of having power wielded over them by women Rowlands (1997:11)."

In the past decade, various indexes have been developed to quantify empowerment, with an emphasis on agency. In 2007, Ibrahim and Alkire suggested developing standardized empowerment indicators about personal decisions, household decision-making, autonomy in different domains, and the ability to change one's life. In 2012, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), and the Feed the Future initiative, under the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), launched the "Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index" (WEAI) (Alkire et al. 2013). The WEAI defines five domains of empowerment: (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 (Alkire et al. 2013). Based on the index it is possible to calculate individual empowerment scores of men and women in the same household, and gender parity using population-based surveys (Alkire et al. 2013).[1] As such, the WEAI is not ideal for individual project assessments, which would compare participants and non-participants and typically measure a broader set of outcomes more likely to change over the life of the project.

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[1] Since the inception of the WEAI in 2012, IFPRI has released an abbreviated WEAI (A-WEAI) with six, rather than 10, indicators in the same domains (Malapit et al. 2017). The WEAI and A-WEAI were designed to measure empowerment in population-based surveys.

As part of the Gender, Agriculture and Assets Project Phase 2 (GAAP2), IFPRI is working with 13 agricultural development projects to develop a project-level WEAI (pro-WEAI) better suited to assess gender parity and empowerment within the context of specific development interventions. The selected portfolio accounts for differences in project priorities while facilitating comparisons across the 13 projects and over time. These projects helped identify the aspects of empowerment to measure, both for baseline diagnosis and to assess progress in meeting their objectives of facilitating women's empowerment. The resulting indicators of the pro-WEAI are mapped to three domains: intrinsic agency (power within), instrumental agency (power to) and collective agency (power with) (Table 1; see Malapit et al. 2018). In addition to conducting quantitative surveys at baseline and endline to develop and test an index, each project committed to undertake complementary qualitative work.

Table 1. Domains, indicators, and weights of pro-WEAI

Domain	Indicator	Weight
Intrinsic agency	Autonomy in income	1/12 for each indicator
	Self-efficacy	
	Attitudes about intimate partner violence against women	
	Respect among household members	
Instrumental agency	Input in productive decisions	
	Ownership of land and other assets	
	Access to and decisions on financial services	
	Control over use of income	
	Work balance	
	Visiting important locations	
Collective agency	Group membership	
	Membership in influential groups	

Source: Malapit et al. 2018

The mixed-methods approach to developing measures of empowerment builds on the "Q Squared" (qualitative-quantitative) approach to studying poverty (Kanbur 2003; Shaffer 2013). As noted by Shaffer (2013:270):

> "The first challenge concerns the imperative of using "locally meaningful" categories of poverty. Otherwise stated, conceptions of poverty should correspond to people's understanding of the term. …Failure to do so may lead to analytical biases and blind spots: "we interpret all other societies in the categories of our own" (Taylor 1985:42)."

Similarly, for addressing empowerment we must recognize that rural women, rural men, project implementers, and researchers may conceptualize empowerment differently, and key elements of "empowerment" may differ across contexts (Nightingale 2003; Cornwall and Anyidoho 2010; Cleaver 2005).

The objectives of the qualitative research overall include:

- Validation of pro-WEAI, including both emic[2] meanings of "empowerment" and individual domains and indicators

- Explaining project impact from participant and project staff perspectives

- Contextualising and interpreting quantitative pro-WEAI and other findings

Contextualization aims to situate survey data that focuses on only individuals and their households within their broader communities and social norms. Contextualization also covers the temporal dimension—both seasonal patterns and overall trends—clarifying, for example whether the survey data is collected in the "hungry season" or when food and income are relatively abundant, or whether the data on time use is from a busy season or slack season. Finally, the qualitative data can contextualize the project intervention relative to other development programs or broader socio-economic trends, such as migration. In this way, qualitative research around empowerment adds nuance to quantitative measures of empowerment.

The aim of this paper is to synthesize the findings from eight of the 13 GAAP2 projects that had completed qualitative reports at the time of this work. We first provide an overview of the GAAP2 methodology as well as more detail about the development of the qualitative protocol. This overview is followed by a discussion of findings on local understandings of empowerment, both in general and with particular emphasis on the first objective: validating the index by providing emic meanings of the overall concept of empowerment as well as component concepts and indicators. In many cases, the qualitative

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[2] "Emic" refers to "insider" perspectives of those within a particular group, contrasted with "etic" perspectives based on generalizations about human behavior that are considered universally true, which may be of more interest to outside analysts than to insiders.

studies provided insights on linkages (synergies, tradeoffs, and sequencing) among indicators that are otherwise not addressed in the quantitative study. The presentation of the findings reflects the domains and indicators of pro-WEAI, as well as other literature on women's empowerment in each area. The concluding section reviews areas of complementarity and divergence between concepts of empowerment held by researchers, program designers, and local women and men, and how sensitivity to these differences, as well as the contextual information from qualitative research, can lead to more effective programming.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Developing shared qualitative protocols for individual studies

At the GAAP2 inception meeting in January 2016, participating projects identified topics and potential indicators that they would want a pro-WEAI instrument to cover. The survey and qualitative data collection were designed to collect data on those topics, as well as the topics included in the A-WEAI. The projects requested guidance on what qualitative data to collect, and what instruments would be suitable. The intention was to offer flexible protocols to guide the collection of relevant qualitative information that could be adapted to meet the specific needs and questions of each project. To develop these protocols, the research team held a virtual meeting on April 20-21, 2016, during which the core members of the GAAP2 staff at IFPRI and qualitative researchers across projects met to discuss lessons learned from previous qualitative work and objectives for future qualitative research under GAAP2. An important focus was to identify the most promising methods to address local (emic) understandings of empowerment, key aspects of the biophysical, institutional, and socio-economic environment, and information related to the various indicators proposed by projects for pro-WEAI for validation of the index. Because qualitative data had been used to validate some of the original indicators of the WEAI, the qualitative data collection for pro-WEAI focused on the new indicators proposed for the pro-WEAI, including autonomy in control of income, mobility, intra-household relationships, and intimate partner violence (IPV) perpetuated against women, and revisited three important indicators from the original WEAI: decision-making on agricultural production, ownership and control over resources, time, and leadership.

Working groups for each topic area created a matrix listing the detailed questions, with columns listing potential methods of data collection, such as focus group discussions, key informant interviews with community leaders and project staff, life histories, seasonality calendars, direct observation, and review of project documents. The qualitative team went through resulting matrices for each topic area and prioritized the questions as essential and recommended, then used the matrix to draft protocols that could

meet the program objectives. The result was a set of protocols outlining focus group discussion questions on local meanings of empowerment and individual indicators, as well as semi-structured interviews with project participants and participants from control groups to understand their life histories and key decision points they faced, or traders and marketers to understand the local agricultural markets.[3] The protocols provide detail on the objectives, the data collection techniques, sampling issues and field logistics associated with each topic (see Table 2).

Table 2: Overview of qualitative data collection instruments

Tool	Purpose
Activity A. Review of project documents	To gather any relevant background material on the project area and relevant statistics or background on previous activities in the area and their gender dimensions.
Activity B. Community profile	To provide social, economic, and agricultural, and background information about the community
Activity C. Seasonality patterns	Create a production calendar which shows how responsibilities are distributed by gender, and how seasonal variations affect time use for women and men; important for pro-WEAI to identify whether the time use survey data is from a peak or slack season
Activity D. Focus group: Local understanding of empowerment	To elicit local understanding of empowerment, and to validate the pro-WEAI, especially for the new domains.
Activity E. Semi-structured interview: Life histories	Life stories of men and women of different empowerment status to understand perceptions and experiences of women's empowerment within the context of agricultural intervention projects and to validate elements within the pro-WEAI survey tool.
Activity F. Key informant interview: Market traders	Provide context related to operation of value chain, especially linked to assets being studied. Are there particular gender-related barriers to engaging with the markets?
Activity G. Key informant interview: Project staff	Fill out basic contextual information about the projects and communities in which interventions take place and gain expert insights about the factors affecting the way the project does (or does not) have an impact on women's empowerment.

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[3] The full protocols are available at http://weai.ifpri.info/files/2018/04/GAAP2-Qualitative-Protocols-no-comments-.pdf.

2.2 Data collection: Project portfolio and sampling

This paper is based on qualitative studies[4] from eight of the 13 projects that collected qualitative

data between November 2016 and February 2018 (see Table 3).[5] Of these, two are from South Asia, three

from East Africa, and three from West Africa.

Table 3. GAAP2 portfolio and sample size of the qualitative research component (as of October 2018)

Project name	Partner organization(s)	Country	Key informant or life history interviews			Focus groups (N)
			Total (N)	Women (N)	Men (N)	
Bangladesh Agriculture Value Chains (AVC)	Development Alternatives Incorporated (DAI), IFPRI	Bangladesh	54	17	37	16
Building resilience of vulnerable communities in Burkina Faso (Grameen)	Grameen Foundation and Brigham Young University	Burkina Faso	14	6	8	4
UN Joint Programme on accelerating progress towards the economic empowerment of rural women in Ethiopia (JP-RWEE)	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development, United National Entity for Gender Equity and the Empowerment of Women, World Food Programme	Ethiopia	68	30	38	40
Small-scale irrigation and women's empowerment in northern Ghana (iDE)	International Development Enterprises (iDE) and IFPRI	Ghana	24	16	8	12
Making the most of milk (MoreMilk)	International Livestock Research Institute, IFPRI, International Institute for Environment and Development, Emory University	Kenya	53	28	25	6
Deploying improved vegetable technologies to overcome malnutrition and poverty (WorldVeg)	World Vegetable Center	Mali	19	16	3	12
Empowerment, Resilience, and Livestock Transfers (Heifer)	Heifer Project International, Montana State University, University of Georgia, IFPRI, Nepā School of Social Sciences and Humanities	Nepal	34*	N/A	N/A	21
Evaluation of women's food security program for impoverished Maasai households (Maisha Bora)	Savannahs Forever, Trias, University of Minnesota	Tanzania	52	26	26	14

*Note: N/A: Not available. *The gender identity of all participants was not reported.*

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[4] Because of confidentiality concerns, the original transcripts and field notes were not shared beyond the original qualitative research teams.

[5] Several qualitative studies will be completed by mid-2019, but those results were not available for this paper.

Though all rural development projects aiming to enhance women's empowerment, each project in the

portfolio have slightly different target populations (as noted in Box 1).

Box 1: Description of participating projects

The Bangladesh **Agriculture and Value Chains (AVC)** project targets pulses, tomatoes, mangos, ground nuts, potatoes, jute, and floriculture. Qualitative research focused on actors in the jute value chain and was conducted after the quantitative midline survey to better understand quantitative findings and intervention impacts. AVC interventions aim to enhance nutrition and food security through a market systems approach, working for instance with input manufacturers to strengthen their marketing strategies and distribution channels of their inputs for smallholder farmers (including promotional agricultural input discounts via raffles for male farmers). In a previous iteration of the program, AVC provided male farmers with trainings about improved seed varieties, cultivation practices, and gender and nutrition issues.

Building Resilience of Vulnerable Communities in Burkina Faso (Grameen) seeks to enhance the resilience of communities in disaster-affected regions of Burkina Faso by facilitating women's economic empowerment. Through women's savings groups, women receive trainings on agricultural businesses, food preparation, and nutrition. They also gain access to formal agricultural financing products to support income generating activities and agricultural investment, such as for growing and selling cowpeas and sesame, and animal raising. The qualitative findings from Grameen included here were collected prior to intervention implementation and the quantitative baseline survey.

UN Joint Programme on "Accelerating Progress toward the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (JP-RWEE) aims to generate lasting improvements in rural women's wellbeing, with particular focus on four areas: improved food and nutrition security; increased incomes to sustain livelihoods and create wealth; enhanced participation and leadership in rural institutions/organizations; and, more gender responsive policy environments. The JP is currently being implemented in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, Niger and Rwanda. JP-RWEE programming activities in Ethiopia include: (i) training to strengthen the technical capacity of rural savings and credit cooperatives (SACCOs) and pastoral savings and credit cooperatives (PASCCOs); (ii) provide credit to women engaged in agricultural, agro-pastoral and off-farm activities; (iii) provide trainings about financial literacy, entrepreneurship skills, and business development training; and (iv) train 100 facilitators to conduct gender-sensitive community conversations. JP-RWEE results Ethiopia included in this paper were collected at the beginning of project implementation to provide insights into baseline quantitative study findings.

The **Small-scale Irrigation and Women's Empowerment in Northern Ghana (iDE)** project aims to reduce food insecurity and improve nutrition through the introduction of modern irrigation equipment for vegetable cultivation during the dry season. iDE provided randomly-selected small groups of farmers (both men and women) with credit to purchase motor pumps. The theory of change proposes that when women have access to these resources, they will increase productivity of the plots they manage, increase income from the sale of irrigated crops, improve food security, nutrition, and health by increasing availability of and access to nutrient-dense crops and animal source foods. The iDE qualitative data presented here were collected during project implementation, with the intent to better understand men's and women's roles in irrigated agriculture and the pathways through which women may benefit from irrigation.

MoreMilk: Making the Most of Milk is unique from the rest of the portfolio in that program beneficiaries live in a peri-urban setting. This project aims to improve child health and nutrition outcomes by enhancing access to high-quality milk in impoverished neighborhoods of Nairobi, Kenya. The program will train current milk vendors about proper milk handling techniques, good business practices, and local dairy regulations and certifications. The qualitative work was carried out prior to program implementation and the findings will inform the training curricula development and project-specific revisions to the quantitative pro-WEAI survey.

The goal of **Deploying Improved Vegetable Technologies to Overcome Malnutrition and Poverty (WorldVeg)** is to reduce malnutrition in Mali, particularly among children. The WorldVeg intervention aims to reduce malnutrition through diet diversification and increased vegetable consumption. The theory of change holds that the following four project activities will reduce malnutrition: (i) behavior change communication about nutrition, WASH, postharvest methods, and cooking; (ii) training women on home gardening methods; (iii) home visits to re-enforce training lessons; and (iv) community mobilization via discussion groups with various stakeholders (e.g., men and grandmothers) to encourage gender norm change around women's access to productive assets and time use. The qualitative WorldVeg work was completed before the baseline quantitative survey.

The **Empowerment, Resilience, and Livestock Transfers (Heifer)** project aims to enhance women's empowerment, financial inclusion, mental health, assets, income, expenditures, food security and nutrition, and economic resilience among rural Nepali producers. The intervention targets women and provides a package of benefits that includes the formation of women's self-help and savings groups, a productive asset transfer (specifically goats), technical trainings on improved animal management and entrepreneurship, nutrition trainings, and values-based trainings. The qualitative findings from Nepal presented here were collected during intervention implementation, yielding insights on how women perceive the intervention.

The **Evaluation of Women's Food Security Program for Impoverished Maasai Households (Maisha Bora)** project aims to improve food security among semi-pastoralist communities in Tanzania, in partnership with the Trias and Savannas Forever organizations. Intervention components emphasize income diversification; such components include: (i) forming savings and credit groups; (ii) training on entrepreneurship, marketing livestock and related products, gender issues; (iii) increasing women's asset ownership; and (iv) building capacity among local pastoralist organizations. Qualitative data were collected during intervention implementation.

As noted earlier, the qualitative studies aimed to inform the development of the pro-WEAI index,

which requires integration with the survey work and quantitative analysis. Ideally, there would be an

iterative process by which qualitative work informs the design of the survey, and initial analysis of the

survey raises questions that the qualitative research can further address (see Kanbur 2003). However, to

be useful for project impact assessment, the baseline surveys needed to be conducted before project implementation. Thus, time constraints precluded conducting qualitative research before the baseline survey was designed. All but one of the projects (MoreMilk) conducted qualitative studies after the baseline surveys were completed. The Nepal Heifer project had conducted qualitative research in the study area before GAAP2, which also informs this study.

The degree of linkage of the individual respondents in the qualitative and quantitative samples varied across the studies (Kanbur 2003; Booth 2003). Projects implemented the surveys and qualitative studies in different sequences and with different objectives. In the AVC, iDE, Maisha Bora, and Grameen studies, teams structured their purposive qualitative research samples to include individual respondents from the treatment and control groups who participated in the baseline surveys. The remaining projects selected qualitative respondents from the same communities included in the quantitative study, but did not select the same individuals sampled for the survey, either because it was not feasible (e.g., because the MoreMilk qualitative study was conducted before the baseline survey), or because of concerns that it would be asking too much of respondents to take the time for both a relatively long survey and qualitative interviews. Despite the variability of linkage between the quantitative and qualitative samples, each qualitative study offers insights into its complementary quantitative findings – albeit in different ways depending on how samples were selected and when the qualitative work was completed. Additional information on participant selection for each tool applied is provided in Table 2.

The qualitative samples varied from project to project, with the number of respondents ranging from 14 to 68 key informant or life history interviews, and six to 40 focus groups (see Table 3). Focus groups and interviews were carried out in local languages, with responses translated into English or French before undergoing analysis.

2.3 Data analysis

This paper relies on two stages of analysis: that of the eight individual projects and that of the synthesis presented here. Individual projects used a thematic analysis approach[6] structured around the topics previously identified in the portfolio-wide protocols. Some projects used qualitative software such as NVivo to code data, whereas others used manual reviews of field notes and transcripts for thematic analysis.

The common themes described in each project's study made it possible to synthesize the findings. Many final project reports (some written by the authors of this synthesis) included anonymized quotations taken from interview and focus group transcripts, which facilitated the comparative analysis of participant experiences and perceptions across contexts. The authors followed up with project staff to clarify individual project findings for the synthesis as needed. The thematic analysis used by individual projects also helped to validate the pro-WEAI index because the themes overlapped with the domains and indicators, as intended.

The analysis presented here is a synthesis of the eight projects with available qualitative findings. The authors reviewed each project report and compared and contrasted context-specific findings around each of the three domains. The similarities and differences revealed by comparing the projects are presented below.

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[6] Thematic analysis is conducted by discovering which topics or patterns (themes) arise repeatedly among all participants in the sample.

3. EMIC UNDERSTANDINGS AND LOCAL ATTITUDES TOWARD EMPOWERMENT

Translating "empowerment" into local languages appropriately was a common challenge in all project sites. The term "empowerment" could not be directly used, usually because there were no equivalent terms in the local languages. Where local respondents were familiar with the term, it was often because they had been exposed to it through some form of training or "sensitization" program, often led by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or governments. In those cases, to use the term "empowerment" would likely prompt respondents to give the official definitions that they had been taught or "NGO-speak."

Instead most qualitative research teams drew upon Kabeer's (1999) definition of empowerment, by asking respondents to describe a woman in their community who is able to make important decisions in her life and to put those into action. The MoreMilk study of milk traders in peri-urban Nairobi used the Swahili words that literally translate to "to lift up" or "to enable" (Heckert et al. 2018). If MoreMilk participants required further explanation, it was explained along the lines of self-determination, but leaving open whether this would be individually-oriented or collectively-oriented; as such, MoreMilk participants considered an empowered woman to be someone business-minded, but who may also be someone who helps her husband. The iDE study in Ghana translated the term roughly as "powerful people" (Bryan et al. 2018). In the JP-RWEE case, the team used "*cimina*" (referring to strength or ability) and "*gahumsa*" (referring to capability or capacity) in Afan Oromo. The terms mainly represent the ideal characteristics of a woman/man in the community and are reflective of the ideals of femininity and masculinity embedded in the society's cultural framework, which describes an empowered person as someone who is strong/able/capable, acceptable, and respectable. In Nepal (as in India), empowerment is literally translated as "*sashaktikaran.*" The research team wanted to go beyond this official definition, so they approached the question from different directions, first using terms "admired" and "active" in one category, and "doing as one wishes" and

"ability to make important life decisions" in another category, as well as exploring perceptions of "disempowerment." In Bangladesh AVC, taking decisions independently was often seen negatively, so researchers eased into the discussion by asking respondents to describe women who were respected or admired and then probed the extent to which those respected women could take independent decisions and on what topics.

In only two cases did focus group respondents describing women's empowerment mention high-level political representation of women. In Burkina Faso, focus group discussants invoked Saran Sérémé, a national politician, as an example of an "emancipated" woman because she is perceived as "committed, firm and visionary" (Kieran, Gray, and Gash 2018:29). In Bangladesh, both men and women acknowledged that the women leaders of the nation's political parties were empowered, but they did not see that to be relevant in their own lives. This finding underscores the need to move beyond indicators such as the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments, which have been used to measure women's empowerment (e.g., in the MDG 3 on gender equality) to measure aspects of empowerment that relate to women's lived experiences in our study areas. Conversely, the lack of discussion around political representation may indicate a general disengagement with politics in some contexts or a lacking critical consciousness about political representation in others.

Local understandings of empowerment showed a wide variety, even within a single site, both among and between men and women:

> According to women's focus group discussants, an empowered woman makes concrete
> decisions, works independently, does not depend on her husband's money for her personal
> needs, has a husband who respects her, and has the financial means to cope with the health,
> schooling, and food expenses of her family. An empowered woman is considered to be an
> "autonomous" or "emancipated" woman. In addition, an empowered woman is a visionary,
> dresses well, has skin that shines, has good housing, and both she and her children have
> sufficient food. An autonomous woman differs from an autonomous man because she cares
> more about her parents and significantly contributes to their well-being…

14

Based on the men's focus group discussion … an autonomous woman is ambitious and courageous. She is a worker, a fighter, interacts easily with others, and has leadership skills. In addition, she has money and, as a result of her financial situation, may not show respect or consideration for her husband, suggesting that she is perceived as threatening to traditional cultural norms (Kieran, Gray, and Gash 2018:28-29).

Even with this complexity, it is possible to roughly map the characteristics cited in the different qualitative studies to the etic theoretical constructs of Achievements, Resources, and Agency. However, participants did not distinguish among these, and there is some conceptual ambiguity, such as whether education or good appearance represent achievements or resources, and whether personal traits such as hard working are resources or intrinsic agency.

3.1 Achievements

The descriptions of empowered women (and men) often focused on what external observers might classify as their achievements, or the desired outcomes people enact using their agency over resources. In many cases these were tangible and economic achievements. Both women and men noted a strong and consistent link between empowerment and economic capacity. An empowered woman was described as someone who has a good harvest (WorldVeg, Mali), is able to meet her basic needs and those of her family (Grameen, JP-RWEE, MoreMilk, WorldVeg, AVC), or "someone who can take care of her children and family by providing food, clothing, housing and education" (Maisha Bora Tanzania, reported in Krause et al. 2018:8).

Respondents in multiple sites considered that this ability to meet one's needs could be visible physically, as empowered women were well dressed, clean, had nice skin, and a beautiful appearance and home (Grameen, WorldVeg, MoreMilk). But not all achievements were material. The Grameen example quoted above described an empowered woman as having "a husband who respects her" (Kieran, Gray, and Gash 2018:28), which may be considered as a type of social achievement. In other cases such as JP-

RWEE in Ethiopia, AVC in Bangladesh, and iDE in Ghana, being respected in the community was cited—another form of achievement. In all of these cases, earning respect was associated with following social norms, which has implications for agency—a point we return to in the discussion of interaction among aspects of agency.

3.2 Resources

Resources differ from achievements in that they are pre-conditions that facilitate choice; achievements are outcomes – whether material or not – that result from choices made. Resources may be tangible (e.g., land, livestock) or intangible (e.g., human, social). Productive resources were associated with empowered women in most of the studies (MoreMilk, iDE, Grameen, Maisha Bora, Heifer). Perhaps not surprisingly, livestock were specifically mentioned among the Maasai in Tanzania (Maisha Bora) and Fulani in Mali (WorldVeg)—two pastoralist societies. The Nepal Heifer study gave considerable attention to property rights over a variety of assets as related to empowerment. However, this was a two-way relationship: having property rights gave women greater status and some leverage, but the ability to exercise them required a level of empowerment that daughters-in-law, in particular, often did not have. Thus, young women living with their husband's extended family were often unable to protect personal property such as goats they brought to the marriage (Pradhan, Meinzen-Dick and Theis 2018).

Several of the qualitative studies also linked empowerment to less tangible resources, such as formal education (e.g., JP-RWEE, World Veg, Heifer, AVC) or social connections—either to influential people or to groups like NGOs (e.g., iDE, Maisha Bora). In a few cases, even less tangible resources of character traits such as leadership, hard work, courage, intelligence, and (future) vision were associated with empowered women (Grameen, Maisha Bora, JP-RWEE, AVC).

3.3 Agency

Unpacking local expressions of empowerment as the three facets of agency (instrumental, intrinsic, and collective) is more difficult than for achievements and resources. There were few explicit

mentions of intrinsic agency. The mention of empowered women being strong, capable, or a "moral being" (JP-RWEE; Muelma 2018:16), courageous (Grameen; Kieran, Gray, and Gash 2018:29-30), religious and of good character (AVC; Rubin et al. 2018:29) may be considered as aspects of such "power within."

The MoreMilk study gave the clearest examples of instrumental agency: an empowered milk trader was described as someone who is good with customers, makes smart decisions, clean/hygienic, and maintains high-quality milk for sale. Respondents in the Grameen and AVC studies, and respondents who are group members in Maisha Bora project also associated hard work with empowered women.

In all of the studies, respondents described women's empowerment as relational. The exercise of agency was described as "lifting the burden" in Ghana (iDE; Bryan et al. 2018). Empowered women were described as helping others: husbands, children, parents, and other women in their community. Respondents in the Heifer study took this beyond helping individuals, to mobilizing women for their collective betterment—a form of collective agency. In Bangladesh AVC, the sphere of helping others was more limited. An empowered woman was said to manage her household well and contribute to the betterment of her family overall. But even this was relational: a woman's ability to both make decisions about how to best care for her family and to do so, for example, by taking on agricultural wage work when her husband was absent, either due to migration, illness, or death, was viewed positively, while doing so when her husband was at home could be seen as disrespectful.

In none of the study sites did women participants consider an empowered woman as one who has "power over" her husband or others in her community. On the contrary, some men did consider the (hypothetical) prospect of empowered women having power over men and perceived this very negatively in the AVC, Grameen, and iDE studies. The instances cited of women having power over other women were of mothers-in-law in Mali and Nepal, and while this was seen as advantageous for those women, the narratives stressed the negative effects this had on the younger women, so even power over other women was seen in a negative light, consistent with Rowlands' (1997) finding that women's power over men is

often considered threatening. This finding informed the development of the pro-WEAI: coercive agency, or power over others, was not included as one of the domains of empowerment.

3.4 Challenging norms or upholding ideals of femininity

Despite the commonalities cited above, the qualitative research also revealed differences in emic understandings of empowerment across groups and sites, associated with (i) challenging norms that limit women's autonomy or (ii) upholding local ideals of femininity and masculinity. In some cases both ideas were expressed within the same focus groups. For example, in the Grameen study in Burkina Faso, respondents in both male and female focus groups described an empowered woman as "autonomous" and "emancipated," but also described such women as "submissive" – respecting the wishes of their husband and family (Kieran, Gray, and Gash 2018:29). While the Grameen study provides the most explicit expression of this seeming contradiction, a similar tension is present in the other studies as well, where empowered women were also described in terms of ideals of femininity in order to be "respectable," or to maintain family harmony (iDE; Bryan et al. 2018). There may be several explanations for this. One is that conforming to social norms, even restrictive gender roles, can be a form of agency on the part of women to strengthen ties with husband and in-laws and secure their position in the family (Mahmood 2005; Rashid 2013; Singh 2016). For example, Pradhan, Meinzen-Dick and Theis (2018) describe women in the Heifer project who embrace the roles of the dutiful daughter-in-law or wife as employing a strategy to secure access to joint family property, and even refusing to have land registered in the woman's name where that might be perceived as moving away from the marriage. A second explanation may be that pushing back against restrictive norms is seen as empowerment, but that is not valued or admired, as. Mulema (2018:16) describes in Ethiopia:

> Empowerment is not only about the 'ability to decide' or 'make a choice' but also conduct,
> respect and trust within the household and community. The moral being of a man or woman is
> very important and valued by communities. If we focus on 'choice' alone, then it focuses on

individual independence, …. It fails to capture the mutual interdependence. A woman has a relationship with her husband and society so individual choice lacks mutual interdependence.

Thus, while empowered women "lifting the burden" or helping their families, neighbors, and communities contributed to the general acceptability of women's empowerment among women participants (and many men), some respondents reported disadvantages of empowered women.[7] For example, young Fulani women and Minianka men in Mali considered that empowered women would elicit the jealousy of other women. In the JP-RWEE study in Ethiopia, both men and women perceive empowered women's mobility negatively because it threatens masculine control over information, knowledge, and networks. Additionally, women in Adami Tulu and Yaya Gulele in Ethiopia consider women and girls who exercised autonomy in violation of socially accepted behavior (e.g., women who moved freely without informing or consulting their husbands) to be social deviants and feared emulating them.

As noted above, in some sites, men expressed concerns that an empowered woman would have power over men (iDE, AVC, WorldVeg), or that empowered women's knowledge of their rights could make them "uncontrollable" on issues such as who the women should marry (JP-RWEE). In Burkina Faso, men considered that an empowered woman may threaten cultural norms by lacking respect or consideration towards her husband (Grameen). In both the Grameen and MoreMilk cases, men who are "caring" for their wives or help with the housework could be perceived as being weak, controlled by their wives, or even "bewitched" (Kieran, Gray, and Gash 2018; Heckert et al. 2018). In AVC, some men expressed concerns that the husbands of women who make independent decisions would find their behavior unacceptable, further demonstrating that some men may expect women to fulfill more submissive gender roles.

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[7] These concerns were expressed by other men and women, not by empowered women themselves.

3.5 Women's status and empowerment

A woman's marital status and social position were also linked to their empowerment. In Mali, men considered marriage a precondition for Fulani women's empowerment, whereas in Burkina Faso, women participants considered women who were single heads of households "liberated." In Mali, social position was also largely a function of ethnicity and class, whereas in Nepal it was linked to caste or ethnicity, education level, and household structure (nuclear or extended). In both cases, empowerment was associated with position within the household, with empowerment increasing as women moved from being daughter- to mother-in-law in Nepal, or in Mali as women married, had children (especially sons), and then, ultimately, got a daughter-in-law to do the house work. In both sites, age or stage in the life cycle was perceived as influencing women's empowerment, with younger women being less empowered than older women due to heavier labor burdens and lack of voice in household decision-making. For example, a young woman from Mopti, Mali remarked that "I am considered young therefore my suggestions are not taken into consideration" (Bagayoko 2018:41). Household migration status (presence or absence of adult men due to migration) was also reported to influence empowerment in Nepal, in complex ways. While greater empowerment and positive changes were associated with a shift from extended to nuclear households, in which daughters-in-law gained influence over significant household decisions, including the use of the woman's personal property, women did not consider the autonomy they gained through male out-migration desirable or even empowering, as they valued the presence, cooperation and support from their husbands more than the increased autonomy (see also O'Hara and Clement 2018).

4. PERSPECTIVES ON SPECIFIC INDICATORS

The qualitative research probed for insights about the indicators included in the A-WEAI and those that the projects indicated that they would like included in pro-WEAI. The qualitative work allowed us to probe behind the closed-ended questions used to measure these indicators in the survey, and to explore the significance of each of these indicators in emic perspectives on empowerment. In this section, we discuss key findings and how they have informed the development of pro-WEAI, with particular focus on the new aspects of empowerment suggested by the projects. We begin with aspects of instrumental agency (decision-making in agricultural production, control over assets, control over income, time, and mobility), then turn to intrahousehold relationships and intimate partner violence against women, which are mapped to the pro-WEAI domains of intrinsic agency, and end with a discussion of leadership and group membership, which are associated with collective agency.

4.1 Instrumental agency

4.1.1 Decision-making on agricultural production

Across the projects, participants described a range of decision-making scenarios, with variations often linked to the type of decision made. A broad pattern is that women were more likely to make instrumental or everyday decisions, rather than strategic decisions (c.f. Kabeer 1999). For example, women were more likely to report making decisions about small livestock while men made decisions about cattle among the Maasai in Tanzania (Maisha Bora). Similarly in Ethiopia, JP-RWEE found that women in dual adult households exercise autonomy over agricultural activities that occur on small scale, with smaller quantities of produce, and products or activities of low value, whereas men make decisions on larger amounts or higher values of produce. Among jute producers in Bangladesh, men made most of the decisions about cultivation while women managed the manual processing of jute fiber. The WorldVeg garden project in Mali found that, even though the project targeted women, women decide which crops to grow only with respect to their own productive activities rather than household production, and "under the

advisement of their husbands (this is a show of respect)" (Bagayoko 2018:32). In many sites, women reported being "consulted," but said men made the ultimate decisions.

The rationale for why women's participation in agriculture-related decisions was limited varied across projects. In some cases (e.g., the Ethiopian JP-RWEE case), women's overt decision-making was seen as a threat to masculinity and farming is considered to be men's sphere – a farmer is understood to be a man. However, although men are the ultimate decision makers regarding agricultural production, they often consult their spouses before making decisions; women have more influence than might appear on the surface.

Women involved in the Maisha Bora project in Tanzania had mixed influence over such decision-making. While the Masaai women have almost no direct decision-making power over large livestock in the *olmarei* (homestead with a husband and all his co-wives and children) and at the *enkaji* level (usually one wife and her children) because livestock is culturally defined as under men's control, women did report having influence over these decisions in some families, especially related to goats or poultry.

In some cases, different views were advanced within the same site, within and across gender groups. Men and women in the AVC study in Bangladesh presented contradictory views about decision-making. While both men and women emphasized that it was not good for women to make decisions independently, there were also both men and women who strongly supported consultation and joint decision-making between spouses, noting the changes that they saw towards greater participation by women and the idea that the "modern world needs both men and women to work side by side and take joint decisions in household matters" (Rubin et al. 2018:33).

During public discussions in focus groups in the iDE study in Ghana, the dominant discourse was around the importance of family harmony. In interviews held in private, women indicated that they want more input on decisions, but do not want full responsibility for decisions in case they go wrong. In Mali, participants reported that women are involved in agricultural decisions in nuclear, but not in extended, families. In Burkina Faso, the Grameen study found that men reported joint decision-making with women, but women said that this was rare. By contrast, women in the Heifer study in Nepal reported

making routine decisions and consulting men on more strategic decisions, even by phone if they had migrated. Milk traders in the Kenya MoreMilk study were reported to be making decisions about their business, even when it was financed by their husbands.

Overall, the qualitative work under GAAP2 indicates that joint decision-making can be empowering. This evidence supports the decision made to count women with joint or sole decision making as empowered in the WEAI and pro-WEAI. The nuances of joint decision-making revealed in the qualitative research further show that there is a wide range of types of "joint" decisions, which may not be captured by the closed-ended survey questions..

4.1.2 Ownership and control over resources

In line with the range of decision-making scenarios presented above, there is a broad pattern in control over resources across the projects: large and valuable assets, notably land and large livestock, are most likely to be owned and controlled by men, while women's assets are more likely to be small livestock and smaller or less valuable.

The African project sites showed strong similarities with respect to gendered land ownership, which reflects the predominance of patrilineal customary tenure there, where land is passed down the male line.[8] The strongest expression of this came from a focus group of older women in the WorldVeg study in Mali: "no village belongs to a woman" (Bagayoko 2018:27). Men are the owners of the land under the customary system, and women are considered outsiders, no matter how long they have lived there. Even women who are seen to be empowered do not own land or equipment for farming. In the Grameen study in Burkina Faso, few women own land because despite formal laws that allow for women to own land, customary laws and customs dominate.

But property rights are changing in some places. In one of the Ethiopian study areas land certificates were registered in men's names, but in one of the areas the government had begun to issue

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[8] This would not necessarily be the case where land is inherited along matrilineal pathways, e.g., in some parts of Ghana.

land certificates with both husband and wife's names and photos (Mulema 2018). In Bangladesh, women exercise greater decision-making, including over resources, in contexts of male migration (Rubin et al. 2018). The contrast between these examples reveals change may result from top-down, official policy or economic necessity – a major driver of migration.

The qualitative research revealed variations in the way the concept of ownership is understood across cultures, and the caution that must be exercised when interpreting ownership data. We should note that in all the African cases, what is reported as land "ownership" is not necessarily documented or privately owned land. With the exception of the Ethiopia case, most of the land is under customary tenure, and even the Ethiopian land is formally owned by the state, with rights allocated to individuals and households. In the qualitative work, people nonetheless spoke about land in a way that was translated as "ownership." This is an important point that also applies to the interpretation of the survey data, which is self-reported "ownership" of land and other assets, which often would not line up with etic definitions of ownership, especially for land, if these refer to statutory property rights. For example, in the quantitative work conducted in the context of the pro-WEAI Maisha Bora study among the Maasai in Tanzania, 96 percent of men reported that they own some of the land that the household cultivates, while 65 percent of the women reported that they solely or jointly owned household agricultural land, even though very few of them are likely to have state-recognized ownership of the land (Krause et al. 2018). Thus, it is important for surveys to consider how "ownership" is translated.

The Nepal Heifer study probed considerably more in-depth about property rights. Although there is a much stronger history of private land ownership and active land markets in Nepal, land is still considered family property, controlled by the men. Government efforts to increase women's land ownership are manifested in programs offering tax concessions of 25 percent if land registered in women's names, to encourage registering land in the names of women (solely or jointly with their spouse). Few families have done that, however, and women themselves report that they acquire land through marriage, and that to request formal titles to land would be seen as a withdrawal from their marriage. Hence, even where women exercise considerable agency to purchase land for their families by

24

identifying suitable land to purchase and contributing their own savings or assets to the purchase, they rarely put the land in their own name (Pradhan, Meinzen-Dick, and Theis 2018).[9]

The Nepal Heifer study also highlights that it is not only the physical categories of assets (e.g., large or small livestock) but the social categories of assets that matter for women's control. There is a distinction between "family property" (which is controlled by men) and two types of personal property: *pewa* (individual assets) and *daijo* (dowry).[10] Whereas dowry is more often controlled by the extended family, women have stronger claims over pewa. Thus, control of a goat is likely to be quite different, depending on whether it is considered family property, daijo, or pewa. Knowing this, development projects that want to increase women's control of assets can frame them in terms of pewa.

The mode of acquisition of assets was also reported to matter among the Tanzanian Maasai in the Maisha Bora case and the JP-RWEE case in Ethiopia, where livestock inherited or purchased by women was more likely to be under their control compared to those acquired by the household or the husband. However, it is not clear how long-lasting an effect this would have. A cluster-randomized trial in Bangladesh found that though women who participated in an asset-transfer program (received poultry, goats, cows, or seeds) typically maintained control over the assets they received, any new investments that resulted from the asset transfer were controlled by men in their household (Das et al. 2013; Roy et al. 2015). In Ethiopia, Mulema (2018:10) notes that:

> Although culturally women cannot publicly claim individual ownership ('I cannot say
> that it is mine. I have to say that it is ours,' stated one of the beneficiaries), they exercise
> more bargaining power over such resources and men cannot freely access or control them
> without women's consent. Such invisible control over assets by women causes
> underestimation of their power.

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[9] This seems to be changing in some areas, especially with male migration (Adhikari and Hobley 2015).

[10] Daijo or dowry are gifts of household goods and cash given to brides by their natal relatives and guests at their weddings and other wedding related rituals. Pewa refers to gifts given to women before their marriage or income and savings from their own work (Pradhan, Meinzen-Dick and Theis 2018).

Turning to financial assets, women in the study projects do seem to exercise control over assets acquired via micro-finance schemes, including savings in savings groups and much of the microcredit. Milk traders in the MoreMilk case in Kenya have formal bank accounts, sometimes even secret accounts that their husbands do not know about. In most of the cases, this is related to project interventions that have targeted women, both from the study projects and other projects working in the area. However, there is differentiation among groups of women, and flows of financial resources within the household that complicate the question of control over finances. In Nepal, it was mostly senior women who accessed loans (not daughters-in-law), and even when the women took out the loans (because it was easier for women than men to get microfinance loans), men often controlled the income. Banks were rarely discussed as a source of credit or a place for saving, except in periurban locations of the Kenyan MoreMilk case. There, bank loans were available, but were seen as risky, especially because of the large collateral requirements.

The qualitative research shows that claiming ownership and exercising control over assets requires agency. It is not so much that having assets by themselves is empowering for women, but that to even assert those claims, and have them recognized, requires a level of empowerment. While the specific assets that women hold differs across sites, it is clear that property rights are embedded in social relationships and that the complexity of such rights and the negotiations they entail defy easy measurement.

4.1.3 Control over income

There is an overall pattern that women have more control over income that they themselves have earned than over household income. This is similar to the pattern with assets, in which women have greater control over assets that they have acquired than over general household assets. In the GAAP2 studies, women's earnings were often associated with project interventions. For example, the JP-RWEE study noted that diversification of income sources under the project gave women more options for income under their control, but many of the income sources that women control, such as eggs, handicrafts,

brewing, and petty trade, earn only small amounts of money. In the Maisha Bora case in Tanzania, women were said to (normatively) have control over the income they earn from poultry, small livestock, or crop sales, but a number of women reported that they are, in practice, expected to hand it over to their husbands, pointing to the importance of a nuanced understanding of what is meant by "ownership" of assets. In the WorldVeg Mali case, the restrictions on women's control of income were even more stark:

> The man is the sole decision maker related to income in the family. An example is that a woman cannot even sell her own livestock. Her husband is the one who authorized that and who sells it. Income generated by a woman belongs to her children, particularly livestock (Bagayoko 2018:33).

Among jute cultivators in Bangladesh, men and women agreed that contributing to household income gives people greater input into decision making, but they viewed this differently. A woman commented that "As women … earn money and the man lives by his wife's income, so in this case a husband needs to tolerate his wife's voice" (Rubin et al. 2018:34). In other words, augmenting a woman's financial contributions to her household also augments her influence over household decisions. Some of the women reported that women do not receive any share of the income generated from their jute work, but that the money earned is nonetheless spent for household needs. In contrast, other men believed that women "should not go for income earning. Men should earn money, thus should take all decisions in household and outside" (Rubin et al. 2018:34). A quantitative study from 2009 found that Bangladeshi women who work – formally or informally – outside their homes and household farms reported greater decision-making relative to women who only do domestic or farm work within their households (Anderson and Eswaran 2009). The AVC qualitative results illuminate such quantitative results; women's decision-making may be becoming more acceptable as they seize opportunities to contribute to the financial wellbeing of their households through external, paid work because it is a visible contribution to the household, or because they are able to go outside, or both.

But there are also general expectations that women will contribute their income to household expenditures when possible. In the Grameen case in Burkina Faso, women reported that these contributions to family income led to "more understanding" between spouses (Kieran, Gray, and Gash 2018:48). Men appreciated when their wives did not depend on them for everything, but did not feel that their contributions to household finances should lead to more power over household decisions (Kiernan, Gray, and Gash 2018). A similar ambivalence of men to wives' contributions to household expenditures is seen in the iDE study in Ghana, where men feel some relief when women pay school fees, for example, but also fear that these expenditures can threaten their masculinity and role as household "provider" (Bryan et al. 2018). Some women also indicated that the expectations that they take on household expenses like school fees were a burden. In the Nepal Heifer project, daughters-in-law sometimes resented expectations to contribute their income to the extended family, and tried to hide income or savings if there were strained relations with the extended family, or even with their husbands. However, when the household partitioned and women became the co-head of a nuclear household, they were much more willing to contribute to those expenses, and they took pride in their contributions.

In the Maisha Bora case in Tanzania, women were expected to not only contribute to the household, but also to help others in the community—an extension of the notion of empowered women helping others: "The down side of women's control over their own income is that if they have too much and do not help others they are said to be witches or to be engaging in prostitution or other inappropriate behavior" (Krause et al. 2018:38).

As noted earlier, participants across the study sites considered income an important dimension of women's empowerment. While much of this was expressed in terms of having sufficient income (achievement), further discussions of income revealed considerable differences in the degree of control women exercise over any income, and the extent of normative expectations on how women should spend any money that is under their control. It is thus appropriate that two of the pro-WEAI indicators of instrumental agency are control over income and autonomy of control over income, to distinguish between those who spend money based on their own motivation (which is nonetheless influenced by

28

social norms) versus to please others or for fear of social sanctions. Furthermore, the survey questions underlying these indicators ask about control over income from many sources, so it would be possible to see whether increases in women's participation in agriculture or earning income gives them greater control over income.

4.1.4 Time

The time use module is perhaps the most problematic in the quantitative index because, although the 24 hour recall format follows what is considered "best practice" in time allocation studies (Seymour et al. 2016), it is from a single snapshot that does not capture the seasonality of activities in rural areas. Hence, qualitative findings are important to contextualize the quantitative findings. As noted earlier, triangulation of qualitative methods was used to explore time use through the use of seasonal calendars, focus group discussions, and individual life histories. The seasonality diagrams allow us to examine whether the 24- hour reference period for the survey was in the busy or slack season of the agricultural year. Three key findings emerged from the focus group and key informant interviews across the study sites on how men and women experience their workloads.

First, in all study sites, women have heavy workloads at the household, farm, and community levels. The overall pattern across sites was expressed by a 52-year old Bambara woman in Mali: "There is no rest for a woman during the day; she is the first one up and the last one to go to sleep" (Bagayoko 2018:40). Women's workloads are particularly high during the rainy season, at the peak of the agricultural cycle; and workloads are, in many instances, increasing. For example, in JP-RWEE (Ethiopia), women's involvement in project-related income-generating activities reportedly increased their workload. Yet, their husbands did not take up additional domestic responsibilities to support their wives, nor were women in a position to hire labor in their homes. In the MoreMilk project, husbands allowed their wives to engage in milk trading as long as they still fulfilled their expected cooking, cleaning, and care activities. Women's workloads additionally increased as men migrated away from their villages during the dry season (Grameen, Burkina Faso) or year-round (Basis, Nepal; AVC, Bangladesh).

Women across projects acknowledged the constraints posed by this workload, except in the Grameen case, where women did not acknowledge the time they spent doing household chores, cooking, or caring for dependent household members as work, and considered that men worked more than women. In the WorldVeg project, Mali, women reported that time poverty prevented them from fully engaging in income-generating activities and being involved in community activities, whereas in JP-RWEE, Ethiopia, "The workload of women could be translated into long working hours that could impair their health and leave them limited time for self-growth (networking, attending training, meetings and other activities) and to effectively engage in economic activities" (Mulema 2018:9). Likewise, in Heifer, Nepal and in AVC, Bangladesh, women considered that the workload shouldered particularly by migrant's wives in nuclear households posed a challenge for their participation in activities outside of the home.

Second, and relatedly, men's contributions to domestic or care responsibilities was limited across project sites. In the MoreMilk project, Kenya, participants considered that men who "helped" their spouse with domestic chores were "weak" or controlled by their wives. For instance, a woman remarked that "If you find a man washing dishes, women will talk around that the woman is controlling the man" (Heckert et al. 2018). In JP-RWEE, men were relieved of some of their tasks as women took on responsibilities typically reserved for men, while men's movements into women's common labor domains were more restricted. Yet in two project contexts, slight changes in the division of labor were perceptible for men. In Nepal, although women expressed that they wished for greater support for domestic work from their husbands to lessen their workload, a few respondents reported that there has been increased sharing and flexibility in work division because of women's participation in groups as well as increased awareness among women and men about sharing of household work and equality between son and daughters, especially with their exposure to development programs (Nepā School 2017:70).

Similarly., in one site in Ethiopia, women valued men's new contributions to domestic chores (however limited), which they attributed to various interventions by government and development partners aiming for a more equitable gender division of labor. In the words of a 38-year old woman participant considered empowered by her community:

> "I have a good relationship with my husband; he also supports me with the household
> work. For instance, he fetches water, collects firewood using a donkey, and cooks food
> when I'm busy. It is a privilege for me, because my mother did not have such help in the
> past. I think this is a result of increased understanding about the situation of women,
> which came through various trainings (Mulema 2018:9)."

The third point is that women's time use shifts as they move through stages of their life cycle. In Mali, participants considered that young women have such heavy labor responsibilities that they cannot possibly be empowered. In women's and men's perspectives, empowered women are only found among older women who have more free time and depend on their daughters-in-law or daughters to perform household chores. As a 45-year old Dogon woman explains during a life history interview:

> "The turning point in my life has been the easing of my daily responsibilities because of
> my daughters. I can now rest more than before. I no longer cook, collect firewood… I can
> see to my financial needs. I am an autonomous woman."

Time use is also a function of how gender intersects with other factors of social differentiation. In Nepal, participants indicated that daughters-in-law assume the greatest share of household work, and that wives of migrant men carry particularly large work burdens. Several Nepali women explained how shifting from an extended to a nuclear family structure reduces young women's workloads and increases their autonomy. There are innumerable tasks for daughters-in-law to perform in an extended family, and hard work is considered a virtue for daughters-in-law, idleness a flaw. As one Nepali woman explained, "Since we separated [lived in a different household], it is very convenient and easy for me. … whether I work or not is in my hands" (Nepā School 2017:66). Yet it is not necessarily the amount of work, but the extent to which women feel they have control over their time, that matters. The quantitative data for Nepal, for example, indicates no significant difference between mothers-in-law, wives in independent households, and daughters-in-law in overall working time, though mothers-in-law do significantly more productive (agricultural) labor and significantly less reproductive (domestic) labor than either wives or

daughters in law. The difference is therefore not in the hours worked, but in the subjective experience of that work (see. Christiaensen 2003; Quisumbing, Rubin, and Sproule 2016).[11]

The implication of these qualitative findings for the pro-WEAI index development is that time shortages are certainly an important aspect of women's disempowerment, limiting their ability to enact strategic choices. However, an indicator based on number of hours worked in a single day does not capture the importance of seasonality of labor, the extent of multi-tasking done by women, or of the degree of control over time and support for one's workload that our qualitative respondents valued. Thus, an indicator based on women's sense of control over their time, or relative autonomy in time use, may be more appropriate.

4.1.5 Freedom of movement

In all the case studies, women face restricted mobility. Women's mobility is influenced by distance, time of day, cultural norms, workload/domestic responsibilities, and available types transport or infrastructure. Movement to nearby places is relatively easy compared to more distant places, but even then, women are expected to get permission from their husbands, consult with, or at least inform them. Women are restricted from moving at night for fear that they will be accused of infidelity or be victims sexual abuse.

Mobility constraints are well-known among women. For women in jute producing households in Bangladesh, mobility is geographically limited to nearby fields for weeding, and post-harvest, peeling jute fibers near their homes. Nonetheless, some women travel with their husband's permission, particularly if their husbands are absent because of migration, illness, or death. Women's mobility may also be constrained by the type of transportation available. For example, a trader reported that men can travel on top of the vans or trucks that transport jute, but this would not be appropriate for women (Rubin et al. 2018).

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[11] Regarding qualitative assessments of hunger, Christiaensen 2003:72 notes: "Undernourishment in this approach is not defined in terms of objectively countable calories, but rather in terms of people's reported subjective experience of food stress."

In the JP-RWEE study in Ethiopia, women's mobility was also dependent on age, marital status, wealth status, purpose of trip, and cultural and religious norms. The older married women, and separated, widowed or divorced women had more mobility. Any woman who moves freely at her own discretion is considered a social deviant and risks getting divorced if married or rejected by her family if not married. Women in the remote sites did not consider normative freedom of movement to be empowering because, owing to a lack of transport facilities, travelling to trade in the market increased women's workload and they preferred to work at home. This is an important reminder that women's mobility is considered empowering by women only if it is a choice and not a necessity. If mobility is a "push" required to make ends meet, then it is not empowering because it increases women's time burden without a commensurate increase in income.

Mobility of the Tanzanian Maasai women primarily depended on the woman's relationship with her husband, and freedom to attend and trade in a marketplace depended on a woman's experience in the market in addition to her husband's trust in her. Women's independent mobility outside of the village was limited due to fear of social criticism and punishment from their husbands, as noted by one man who was the head of a household:

> "Some wives can travel far without any escort but with my consent but mostly this is for
> a hardworking woman. Others they cannot travel because of the way they behave. Those
> who are behaving badly they are not allowed to travel. For those who travel by foot, they
> will be accompanied because they must have security and also for those who are going to
> bring livestock must be accompanied with some Morani (warrior) to help her bring
> livestock home (Krause et al. 2018:30)."

In Nepal, women's position in the household also influenced their mobility. Parents or guardians restrict mobility of unmarried daughters, mainly due to fear that she will be accused of sexual misconduct. Mobility of daughters-in-law entails a lot of negotiation with both husbands and mothers-in-law, even to attend a local meeting. and more so to visit their natal home, especially if it is far. Only in Ghana (iDE

study) was women's mobility not very constrained. In general, women in this area of Ghana notify their husbands when they travel beyond the village but do not often access markets that are farther away from their village nor do they migrate as far as men for seasonal employment.

Going to the market, to group meetings, and to one's natal home were the types of mobility that qualitative respondents in the different case studies indicated were particularly important; all of these are included in the pro-WEAI survey for calculating mobility. The pro-WEAI survey is also piloting questions that ask who (i.e., herself, partner, parent-in-law, etc.) determines whether women may travel to such places and who might object to a woman's solo travel. More difficult to capture in a survey and not included in the index are the nuances of permission or consent required for women to travel to these places, alone or in groups, the strategies they use to travel, and the social norms that shape how they are viewed when they leave their homesteads. Though the index may ask who makes decisions around women's mobility, the index cannot dissect how such individuals make such decisions.

4.2 Intrinsic agency

4.2.1 Intrahousehold relationships

The qualitative research showed that good intrahousehold relationships are not only valued in their own right, but also have instrumental value for women. To maintain good relations, especially with husbands, wives were expected to be "submissive" to husbands as a sign of "respect" in the JP-RWEE case in Ethiopia and the Grameen case in Burkina Faso. However, this was changing in Ethiopia: "The cultural marriage practice that demands the total submission of women to their husbands is changing because of the increased awareness of women as a result of various trainings provided by the government and NGOs" (Mulema 2018:21). The MoreMilk Kenya and Maisha Bora Tanzania cases both cited trust between husband and wife as important, and the need for women to avoid suspicion of infidelity. Among the polygamous Maasai in Tanzania, in particular, being in a good relationship with one's husband enables women to, acquire resources and gain

input into important decisions. The husband tends to spend time and share more resources with the "favorite" or "most loved wife" (Krause et al. 2018:34). One woman in a focus group explained that the relationship between husband and wife:

> ….does not depend on the age of the woman or her position such as the first wife or the newest wife, but it depends on the level of love of the husband has for each of his wives, and you will observe that the husband provides everything to some women, while he has forgotten the rest who are unloved and therefore it affects their empowerment in that way (Krause et al. 2018:34).

The iDE study in Ghana also reported that a supportive husband was one of the greatest factors in household harmony and women's sense of satisfaction. In both Ethiopia and Nepal, interdependence among spouses was valued more than independence. The MoreMilk study in Kenya reported the importance of supportive husbands for women to succeed in their business. Trust and joint decision-making were critical factors in that support. In households with high suspicion of infidelity, it was difficult for women to receive calls or go out to do business.

The importance of intrahousehold relationships for personal satisfaction and ability to participate in project activities is not limited to spousal relationships. Cooperation among co-wives was cited as enabling women to free up time to attend meetings or other productive activities among the Maasai in Tanzania and several ethnic groups in Mali. Good relations among co-wives and others such as grandmothers in large compounds was also cited as important in the iDE Ghana study. In Nepal, relationships with husbands were important, but relationships with in-laws often received more attention in focus groups. Bad relations with mothers-in-law were disempowering for young women, but older women were also vulnerable if they had bad relations with daughters-in-law when they needed them for care in their later years. Women reported giving up individual claims on resources, especially land, to maintain good family relations.

The qualitative studies show that the quality of intrahousehold relationships is very important to women for intrinsic reasons, as well as to enable many other types of empowerment, including mobility, group membership, and control over assets and income. Many of the qualitative participants stressed the importance of showing "respect," which is consistent with the pro-WEAI indicator of "Respect among household members," defined in terms of a respondent respecting relations and feeling respected by relations, trusting relations, and being comfortable disagreeing with relations (usually husband, but also mother in law or co-wife). What this does not necessarily capture is the sense of "harmony" in the household, which emerged as important in the qualitative studies.

4.2.2 Intimate partner violence perpetrated against women

Across the case studies, intimate partner violence (IPV) was used to control women's behavior. One Maasai man in the Maisha Bora case in Tanzania expressed this most explicitly: "Corporal punishment is very good because she will do what I tell her to do" (Krause et al. 2018:36). Women's fear of IPV restricted their ability to exercise agency. In both the Maisha Bora study in Tanzania and WorldVeg study in Mali, women were constrained from providing input into important decisions or even inquiring about income and expenditures due to fear of being beaten. Among the Maasai particularly, men were more likely to perpetrate IPV when women provided input into livestock decisions, because decision-making regarding livestock is considered men's responsibility. Maasai women had internalized this norm, and reported that IPV was acceptable for various offences such as not caring for livestock or losing an animal; committing adultery; not obeying the husband's instructions; not taking care of the children well; going somewhere without a husband's permission; arguing; or not getting along with a co-wife (Krause et al. 2018:35). In rare cases, some women could ask their natal families to intervene, or appeal to community elders to intervene in cases of violence.[12]

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[12] Although uncommon, similar responses are reported in other settings (see Bhuiya, Sharmin, and Hanifi 2003; Naved and Persson 2008; Clark et al. 2010; Yigzaw, Yibrie, and Kebede 2004).

The JP-RWEE qualitative study in Ethiopia reported IPV happened when women committed infidelity or violated social expectations like not seeking permission to go out. However, the study also found a decline in the prevalence of IPV, attributed to a change in mindset as a result of various targeted interventions. One 40-year-old project participant explained the various factors contributing to this decline, and its positive consequences:

> "I now have a good relationship with my husband. He used to whip me with a strip of animal skin (*shaabbee*). Now everything is done through discussion and in agreement. I will take him to a court of law if he dares to touch me now. I'm no longer in a state of lack of knowledge. In the past, husbands thought that women should not give them orders. Now we decide together. There are changes over the past five years. My participation in decision-making has increased. Now knowledge has expanded. We watch television. We also listen to radio. Our children who are attending school also changed us. Knowledge regarding saving and trading activities has increased. There is no beating like in the past. We now discuss and settle our differences (Mulema et al. 2018:12)."

In Nepal, women were able to use social support through groups and networks in dealing with household problems and abuses. One woman shared that when her husband had beaten her for going to a group meeting, the group members came to her house and humiliated her husband for doing so, which ultimately gave her courage to resist his violence and abuse (Nepā School 2017). The GAAP2 findings around group members pressuring men to stop IPV against their spouses is consistent with other studies from across South Asia—an example of collective agency (Brody et al. 2015:93).Violence is one example of "power over," or coercive agency. Most commonly, men exercised this power against women. We encountered no examples of women using violence against men, nor would any of our respondents have seen that as desirable.[13] But while the qualitative research indicates that coercive agency should not be

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[13] There were also no discussions of physical abuse by women on other women, but there were examples of verbal abuse by mothers in law on daughters in law in the Heifer study in Nepal.

included as a domain of women's empowerment, it does provide support for including acceptability of IPV as an indicator of intrinsic agency. The constant threat of violence affects women's sense of self-worth and ability to act independently, move beyond the homestead, or even try to participate in many household decisions. In Tanzania, a Maasai woman remarked on how her partner's violent behavior perpetuates a state of fear, inhibiting her from taking initiative:

> "You will be afraid of doing anything on your own just because it can result to
>
> beating. All the time you are thinking of the damages and pain of your body due to those
>
> sticks. You can lose parts of your body or get a disability (Krause et al. 2018:36)."

The cumulative effect of this was expressed by another focus group participant in the same study:

> "I'm worried to make any other decisions because I might be beaten by my husband and
>
> he tells me that I'm nothing and can't do anything that can bring fruits to this family
>
> (Krause et al. 2018:31)."

In the WorldVeg study in Mali, a woman in the control group observed how violence devalues women:

> "Even a small boy has more value than a woman, because women are afraid of threats
>
> from men. At a single occasion she is treated rudely and is threatened to death. That is
>
> not the case for men (Bagayoko 2018:37)."

The qualitative study of IPV adds considerable depth to this indicator. For ethical reasons, the pro-WEAI survey does not ask about respondents' own experience with IPV, but rather their attitudes toward the acceptability of violence toward women. In the qualitative research, women and men were more explicit about their actual experiences with IPV, and the consequences for women's sense of self-worth and agency. Furthermore, the direct expression of their experiences with violence carries a power that numbers alone cannot express. Qualitative work around IPV may reveal women's individual and/or community-level strategies to mitigate IPV, as described in the Nepal example, that a quantitative study would otherwise be unable to anticipate. Additionally, the open-

ended approach of qualitative methods allows women to discuss their perceptions of and with IPV over time, which may illuminate which factors drive attitude change around IPV – a feature excluded by a cross sectional survey.

4.3 Collective agency: Leadership and group participation

The collective agency indicators in the original WEAI were classified in the "leadership" domain. As such, the qualitative research began asking about concepts of leadership for men and women, before turning more specifically to discussion of participation in groups. The responses on leadership reflect the general discussions: leaders, like empowered women and men, are those who help others. In the iDE study in Ghana, having the financial resources or social connections (often outside the community) and using them to help others brings power and respect. Similarly in the Grameen study in Burkina Faso, leadership is interpreted not in terms of formal positions but as the number of people for which a person is responsible or the number of people who seek an individual's opinion or counsel. As with general interpretations of empowerment, leadership is not associated with power over others, as reported in Tanzania, where leaders were expected to "act humbly, participate in community fundraisers and regularly report back to group members or the community" or they can be accused of bad behavior (Krause et al. 2018:28). Women were acknowledged as leaders of women; rarely of men, or of mixed groups. Leadership was associated with older women in Grameen (Burkina Faso) and WorldVeg (Mali), and with education in the Maisha Bora (Tanzania), and Heifer (Nepal) studies.

Group membership was highly valued in many of the cases; in the iDE case in Ghana, there was even a song about group membership. Savings and credit groups were valued for providing access to loans, but the JP-RWEE (Ethiopia), Heifer (Nepal), and WorldVeg (Mali) cases gave detailed examples of the empowering effect of group membership, from developing women's confidence speaking in front of others, to more formal literacy training. As one of the women life history respondents in Mali explained, because of literacy training:

"I am a female leader in my community. All the members of the village respect me. I am always informed of the visits in the village and I participate in external meetings, on behalf of my village. I am influential in my village" (Bagayoko 2018:36)."

The most commonly cited constraint to group membership for women was needing their husband's permission to participate, even for those classified as leaders in the groups, though husbands were more likely to give their approval when they saw benefits for the family (Maisha Bora, WorldVeg, and JP-RWEE). In some cases (e.g., AVC in Bangladesh), inconvenient timing and location of the meetings constrained participation, and there were reports about interpersonal problems when some group members reneged on their financial responsibilities. Conversely, the savings groups in Nepal study were reportedly well designed to encourage regular attendance. They had convenient timing of meetings, but also imposed a fine for missing meetings. In addition to economic benefits from the savings and loans, participants expressed that they enjoyed the meetings as a break from their work and a chance to learn and socialize with other women.

The Heifer Nepal study provided a nuanced analysis of groups. Although they were overall seen as beneficial and empowering for those who participated, they were also places for reproduction of power relations and exclusion. Some did not participate actively because of their perceived inadequacy owing to illiteracy and inability to speak in public, or not feeling comfortable with the way meetings were run. Those who did participate in groups generally reported increased confidence and ability to speak up in the groups, as well as increased mobility (by attending meetings) and linkages with others. However, women's increased role in household or community decision-making (such as on infrastructure development) was only experienced by a few women in executive positions. In the Nepal case, women occupying such positions were often the wives or daughters-in-law of elite men. Thus, rather than mitigating social inequalities, groups that provide opportunities to control resources may reinforce hierarchy and inequality if those without education or confidence are excluded.

The overall positive views expressed about group membership as empowering supports the inclusion of this as an indicator of collective agency. The discussion of leadership shows why it is difficult to develop other standardized indicators of collective agency: "leadership" is often not identified with any formal position, but is associated with helping others, rather than helping oneself. Yet to ask questions such as "how many people do you help" would not necessarily reflect the respondent's own empowerment. It may be that collective agency is better measured not at the individual, but at the collective level.

5. INTERACTIONS AMONG THE ASPECTS AND INDICATORS OF EMPOWERMENT

One of the important insights that emerges from the qualitative work relates to *how* various aspects of (dis)empowerment are interrelated. In this section we discuss some of the key interconnections, with their implications for programmatic interventions.

Examining the factors affecting mobility reveals these interrelationships with time, intrahousehold relationships, and transportation. Time acts as a tether: women's domestic responsibilities limit their ability to leave their homesteads for long, whether to attend meetings or visit their natal families. Intrahousehold relationships can either reinforce or mitigate these restrictions on women's mobility. A domineering husband (or mother in law) may restrict his wife (or her daughter in law) from leaving under any circumstances, and there were many cases reported of husbands using violence or threats of violence to keep wives at home. However, supportive husbands were cited as helping with domestic work so that women could go to meetings, especially where they saw that the meetings led to benefits for their families. In the MoreMilk case, an unmarried and successful trader with children said that that children were not the constraining factor on women's time. One could always find family to help with children. The constraining factor on mobility was husbands who expected their wives to care for their children and be wifely. Conversely, cooperation with co-wives to share domestic responsibilities released some of the work burden of women in Mali and enabled Maasai women in Tanzania to attend meetings. Lack of access to and control over transportation or the resources to access them (e.g., having money for bus fare) and labor-saving devices further constrained women's time and mobility. The qualitative interviews revealed how gender norms around time and mobility are connected, limiting the types of agricultural tasks that women can do and when and where they do them. Among jute producers in Bangladesh, for example, women only worked in fields or processed jute fibers close to their homes to avoid being perceived as disrespectful to their families. Thus, mobility restrictions limit women's ability to earn (and

control) income, and their ability to attend group meetings where they could learn and establish social connections that are empowering.

On the positive side, good intrahousehold relations that promote mobility and group participation were shown to improve women's income generation, which further contributed to joint decision-making within households. Among the Maasai in Tanzania, harmony between husband and wife allowed women to participate in groups, increasing opportunities for women to earn income and participate in making important decisions (such as purchase or sale of livestock). In Nepal, women were more likely to contribute to household expenditures and less likely to hide their income when they had a greater say in decisions, more autonomy and better intrahousehold relations. However, increases in women's income did not always improve household harmony: the Grameen study in Burkina Faso reported men's fears that empowered women with money may not show respect to their husbands, and the WorldVeg study in Mali reported the unacceptability of women earning more than their husbands.

As discussed above, having time, being able to travel, and having the support of one's family are critical factors for participating in groups – a key pathway to empowerment in agriculture in our case studies. Village savings and loan groups, producer associations, and marketing cooperatives give women the means to increase their access to assets and key productive resources (such as livestock, credit, knowledge and other agricultural inputs). The qualitative studies show that women can generally maintain control over resources they obtain as a result of group mechanisms, allowing them to gain greater bargaining power and autonomy. Beyond these improvements in instrumental agency, groups often contributed to intrinsic agency by increasing women's confidence and, as in Nepal, reducing intimate partner violence against women.

The analysis of the qualitative data reveals the interconnections among different aspects of empowerment. While this can look "messy," it is an important source of insights on the complexity of empowerment and of pathways to support women's empowerment. It reinforces the value of designing interventions that provide multiple services not only to meet a narrow economic need, such as supplying

fertilizer, but also to address relationships within households (e.g., through trainings) to enable women to take advantage of the opportunities offered by projects.

6. DISCUSSION / CONCLUSION

The multiple and varied ways women and men perceive empowerment that emerged in the qualitative research, and the many terms communities use to describe empowered women (e.g., as "independent", "autonomous", "emancipated", "respected", etc.), highlight the challenge of translating the concept across cultural contexts.

The connotations associated with a woman's ability to make important decisions and enact them in her life elicit diverse, context-specific understandings. Some of these emic understandings do not resonate with external definitions of empowerment and the assumption that such external definitions are desirable to women. Moreover, an empowerment score based on indicators of etic dimensions of empowerment may not reflect one's personal sense of empowerment. For example, in Nepal, O'Hara and Clement (2018) report that many women who achieved high scores on the A-WEAI did not define themselves as empowered because of their husband's absence due to migration and their preference for joint decisions rather than shouldering the burden and accountability of decision-making on their own. The quantitative measures of empowerment, which are anchored in a standardized and translatable definition, should be complemented with understanding of how local people perceive their own empowerment.

In the common definition of empowerment in the literature and development programming, the ability to decide is commonly understood as individual or independent choice. Our findings show that interpretations that privilege individual decision-making fail to capture the relational aspects and mutual interdependence as well as the multiple modalities of agency that hold significance in different contexts and places. These results call for rethinking the assumptions linked to empowerment to better capture the critical nuances of how such (decision-making and other) processes are experienced and valued, and enrich the interpretation of comparable, quantitative pro-WEAI indicators and their different valuation across contexts.

There is a seeming contradiction when empowered women were described as "submissive." Following such social norms and ideals of femininity may seem contrary to Western notions of empowerment, but using and even manipulating social norms can be understood as a form of agency. Indeed, qualitative work under the Nepal Heifer project showed how women chose to embody the roles of dutiful wife, daughter-in-law, or sister rather than to claim property rights to which they were formally entitled. "Therefore, the findings call for rethinking empowerment not as an equivalent to autonomy but also in terms of interdependence and multiple modalities of agency" (Nepā School 2017:73). In the pro-WEAI, setting the thresholds for decision-making and ownership of resources to count joint decision-making as empowerment, and the addition of indicators for IPV and intrahousehold harmony, move beyond the notion of women's empowerment as an individual process to one that considers her in concert with her context.

The GAAP2 qualitative findings offer several critical insights for assessing women's empowerment and informing projects that aim to support women's empowerment. For instance, findings reveal complexities with concept of ownership of resources, and the value of understanding resources as social constructions that hold different meanings for empowerment in different places, rather than merely as material goods to be "owned." The Nepal case demonstrates that women's preferences with respect to land ownership only make sense when positioned alongside considerations for family harmony. Qualitative findings show that the (non) acceptability of women's ownership of certain resources influenced the ways participants communicate about their control over resources, and could thereby affect responses provided by survey respondents. Moreover, ownership of resources is only valuable if women are able to assert their claims, and this ability depends on other dimensions of empowerment.

Control over income is seen as an important dimension of empowerment as a means to acquire material resources, but also for achieving greater voice within the household. Increases in women's income are valued by both women and men, yet beyond a certain point or if women earn more income than men, women's income could become a threat to family harmony. Moreover, findings show that the

significance of women's income for enhancing empowerment should be understood in relation to potential shifts in their financial responsibilities within the household.

The qualitative work shows that groups are a potentially powerful intervention for building individual confidence, social capital and supporting collective agency, but the Nepal study, in particular, shows that groups can also reinforce power asymmetries among women. Differences identified among groups can help guide interventions. Savings and credit groups tend to do a better job of communicating their value to women and holding meetings at a time and place that facilitates their attendance. The qualitative findings reveal nuances of how women perceived the value of groups, affecting whether they were worth the possible risks and opportunity costs of participating, and underscored other informal aspects of leadership which are hard to measure and capture in a survey and point to ways to promote this leadership, including formal education or literacy.

With respect to time use, women do not focus on a desire to have more leisure time per se, but more control over their time. They stress instead how heavy work burdens were debilitating and barriers to their pursuit of other activities, such as earning income, that could contribute to empowerment. Qualitative findings demonstrate that considering women's time use only at an individual level has its limitations, as when some women's labor burdens are reduced it is typically because other women's increase or because they are shared among women. Understanding links between women's empowerment and labor must necessarily entail examining how labor is redistributed among gender groups and not merely among women.

Findings with respect to mobility demonstrate that greater mobility may not be desirable for women when it entails social sanctions and leads to strained relations within the family. As with other indicators, participant narratives reflect the salience of considering intersections between gender and age or life cycle for understanding mobility as an indicator of empowerment.

Finally, findings underscore the importance of harmonious intra-household relations and freedom from IPV not only as an indicator of women's empowerment, but as a pre-condition to women's

empowerment. Respect, trust, and support among spouses and with other family members is key for women not only from a psychological perspective, but also because their spouse is a gatekeeper who can unlock, or conversely limit, their ability to make decisions, control resources and income, move around, and more. These findings together illuminate how empowerment is relational for women, and does not entail power over spouses or over other women, but rather being able to support other household and community members. Across sites, it is considered undesirable for a woman to be out "for herself," even though such a woman may garner a high empowerment score on the pro-WEAI.

These findings point to critical considerations for projects seeking to support women's empowerment. Although a score obtained using pre-determined indicators is desirable from a comparative perspective, it may not reflect women's own sense of empowerment if they are perceived poorly or socially sanctioned for having the very qualities, abilities, and opportunities on which their high score is based. Findings further demonstrate the importance of considering synergies and trade-offs between different indicators of empowerment. For instance, strategies to enhance women's incomes must include attention to the distribution of financial and labor responsibilities and to maintaining intra-household harmony. Pro-WEAI scores must be considered not only in terms of individual indicators, but also in relation to one another to acknowledge potential complementarities and tensions among aspects of empowerment.

Finally, findings highlight the importance of qualitative research to provide rich contextual data to understand the meanings local people attribute to empowerment, and its desirability. Qualitative findings contributed to determining quantitative thresholds for adequacy and empowerment (e.g., joint decision-making and ownership of assets), and informed the understanding of the relationships among indicators of empowerment. Specifically, the qualitative research provided insight into the relative importance of different types of assets—especially land and livestock—and supported the revision of the asset thresholds in pro-WEAI, to require either ownership of land, or two large assets, or three small assets, to be empowered. More broadly, conducting qualitative research may reveal interconnections between types of agency specific to the context of interest. As such, the authors recommend conducting qualitative

research alongside calculating empowerment with pro-WEAI to better interpret results and ultimately improve interventions. Bringing quantitative and qualitative methods together thus offered a valuable opportunity to explore quantitative trends and patterns in women's empowerment while engaging with the messy complexity within which empowerment takes meaning for women and men in specific times and places.

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