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Measurements of women's economic empowerment: from research to practice

Global development goals for women's economic empowerment require clear measures and definitions of progress. The GrOW program highlights that many definitions of women's economic empowerment exist, and that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Indicators must be clearly defined and reflect local contexts and data availability. For development institutions, it is critical to integrate context-specific indicators within global monitoring frameworks.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Governments have committed to empowering women and girls, most notably through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which aims to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," and SDG 8, which targets "inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all." In Canada, Action Area 3 of the Feminist International Assistance Policy underscores the importance of enabling women's full and equal economic participation, by giving them "more opportunities to succeed, [...] greater control over household resources and decision making," and by "reducing the heavy burden of unpaid work, including child care."

EMPOWERMENT REQUIRES CLEAR MEASURES

- Review of GrOW research found 40 measures of women's economic empowerment
- Distinguishing direct and indirect measures is key; both are relevant, but are not the same
- No one-size-fits-all to adequately reflect context and multi-dimensionality

MEASUREMENT CAN SUPPORT EMPOWERMENT POLICY THROUGH:

- Improving data coverage particularly in low-income contexts
- Complementing direct with indirect measures
- Embedding context-specific measures within global frameworks

Investing in efforts to meet these objectives demands monitoring progress using clear, comparable, reliable, and measurable indicators. Yet, what does economic empowerment look like, and how might it differ from one country to another? Despite much progress in monitoring, there are large data gaps with respect to SDG5 and SDG8, particularly for low-income countries. The multi-dimensional nature of gendered constraints makes them especially challenging to measure.

A review of research projects and relevant literature conducted by McGill University researchers Sonia Laszlo and Kate Grantham found enormous diversity in the ways in which women's economic empowerment (WEE) is defined and the indicators by which it is measured. Furthermore, the underlying assumptions of what empowerment means are often not made explicit. This lack of clarity impedes how we understand WEE, compare progress, and measure the contributions of various empowerment efforts.

APPROACH

Researchers reviewed 32 papers and reports produced by 14 research projects supported through the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) program, a multi-funder research initiative that provides evidence from 50 low-income countries on WEE and the links with economic growth. The authors created an inventory of measures, organized by key domains of empowerment. Separately, the authors undertook a review of recent literature (2005 to 2017) on the challenges of measuring WEE to develop a conceptual framework for measuring it, drawing on various conceptions of agency, capability, and empowerment.

KEY FINDINGS

There is great diversity in approaches to measuring WEE.

Both reviews highlighted a wide range of approaches. Some GrOW projects explored aspects of empowerment — such as women's labour force participation — captured through existing national surveys. For example, GrOW-supported research led by the University of Göttingen (see Policy Briefs No. 9 and 10), identified regional differences and changes over time in women's employment as an indicator of their empowerment. Research on school-to-work transitions in 6 African countries by a University of Sussex consortium explored why young women are not yet benefiting from better employment opportunities, even as the education gap between men and women is narrowing.

Another common measure of women's economic empowerment from existing surveys is autonomy. The Urban Institute used Demographic Health Survey data to explore women's participation in household decisions and objections to wife beating as expressions of autonomy. Findings reveal that economic growth is positively correlated with the women's role in decision-making but not their attitudes towards wife-beating.

Many studies in the GrOW program generated their own measures, tailored to their specific research problem and the available data. Researchers studying the impact of India's

Measures of Empowerment in the GrOW-supported evaluation of the Mahila Samakhyia program in India



Developed by researchers at the Centre for Budget and Policy Studies, Bangalore.

Mahila Samakhyia women's education and empowerment program worked with a multi-dimensional definition, reflecting the program's approach to collective organization and grassroots mobilization. (See diagram) This included indicators of women's employment and savings, awareness of rights, and attitudes towards violence against women.

In all, the review of GrOW projects found over 40 different measures used to analyse women's economic empowerment. These were grouped into three areas: (1) labour market outcomes, (2) control over household resources, and (3) marriage, fertility, and child rearing. Other relevant domains were political participation and access to education and training, illustrating the need to understand empowerment in its many dimensions.

We need to distinguish between direct and indirect measures.

A clear conceptual framework that defines WEE as an essential prerequisite to developing a set of meaningful measures. Based on their literature review, and drawing in particular on the work of Naila Kabeer, Laszlo, Grantham, Oskay and Zhang describe WEE as “the process by which women acquire access to and control over economic resources, opportunities and markets, enabling them to exercise agency and decision-making power to benefit all areas of their lives.” They offer a three-way classification, distinguishing between direct and indirect measures of WEE, and constraint measures.

A woman’s control over household resources is a direct measure of her autonomy or agency within the household. For example, a GrOW-supported project on the impact of cash transfers in Tanzania uses the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), which captures direct measures, such as women’s decision-making over productive resources and income.

School enrolment, on the other hand, is an indirect measure that captures the educational outcomes of women’s decision-making processes. Labour force participation, a key issue in debates on WEE and economic growth, is another indirect measure. Whether it is an expression of agency depends on context and quality. Research by the Institute of Development Studies highlights that rather than being empowered, poor women with few choices are physically and mentally exhausted by a combination of paid work and unpaid care duties.

The WEE conceptual framework offered by Laszlo *et al.* also includes constraints—factors such as legal frameworks and social norms that lie outside the household, yet influence the choices and possibilities available to women. The OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index identifies markers of these discriminatory constraints and enables comparisons across 160 countries. A guidance note by the Donor Committee for Enterprise Development describes key constraints on women’s participation in the market sphere.

Finally, time use, which was not included in the review, illustrates the complexity of WEE. It can be seen as both a direct and an indirect measure and is also a constraint on women’s autonomy.

Indirect measures should be used with caution.

Both direct and indirect measures are important, and are useful for different types of policy decisions. But they should not be conflated. Indirect measures such as employment or education are easier to measure and compare,

although they may be both determinants and results of empowerment. They can also be influenced by factors not correlated with empowerment, such as investments in transportation or other infrastructure.

Clearly distinguishing different types of measures is important not only for research, but for the design of policies or programs that promote WEE. Indirect measures of WEE need to be complemented with direct ones for a comprehensive understanding of policy or program impact. There has been less investment in improving direct measures than indirect ones.

Empowerment looks different in different contexts and domains.

Laszlo and Grantham conclude from their review that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to measuring WEE. Empowerment manifests differently in different contexts, and differently in different domains of a woman’s life. Researchers and practitioners therefore need to make explicit what concept of WEE they are using and choose measures that fit that framework.

Measures may not be meaningful unless they are closely aligned to a specific context. As Laszlo and Grantham note, the effectiveness of measures essentially depends on the “degree of fit between the researchers’ conceptualization of empowerment, the measures they employ, and the data available to them.” This is pertinent in low-income contexts, where economic participation — in the absence of supportive gender policies — may not be empowering, and where the nature of work itself is undergoing structural change.

POLICY INSIGHTS

The examination of measures of WEE has important implications in the design of programs and policies supporting women’s empowerment and in measuring and tracking progress on SDGs 5 and 8.

Clear conceptual frameworks matter.

The diversity found in measures of WEE and the lack of a one-size-fits-all approach do not mean that ‘anything goes’. It is crucial that empowerment initiatives, and those assessing them, adopt clear conceptual frameworks based on context-specific definitions of economic empowerment and related measures of progress. This is as important for research design as it is for policy.

Indirect measures need to be complemented by direct ones.

Comparable indirect measures such as those most prominent in the SDGs need to be complemented by direct measures that better capture women's autonomy and agency, such as decision-making power and control over resources. Such measures are harder to compare across contexts and require different research approaches. They may involve surveys that capture women's own views on their range of choices or the levels of control that women are exercising over resources and decision-making.

Data gaps need to be addressed, especially in low-income countries.

As the international community continues to address data gaps, reflection on best measures remains critical. GrOW projects have worked with available global data sets, such as the DHS and labour force data. This is complemented by qualitative case studies and interviews that shed light on prevailing attitudes and norms that shape women's options and choices in specific local contexts. The findings go some way to addressing a lack of contemporary research on WEE, but also expose the still-limited sources of data upon which progress can be measured, particularly in low-income contexts.

Comparable global indicators are necessary, and possible.

The SDGs are a key instrument for the global development community and national policymakers. International and comparable measures of progress are critical, even more so as the SDGs are universally agreed, for low-, middle-, and high-income countries alike. Indicators that reflect women's agency must be fine-tuned to reflect specific local realities.

The indirect measures described above, such as educational attainment and labour force participation, can be compared across countries and are important proxies of WEE. They provide indications of how women are faring in the economy, but on their own, they do not prove women's autonomy or agency has increased. This is a common concern for aggregate measures, but particularly relevant for those of gender equality given the multi-dimensional constraints women face.

Therefore, aggregate measures need to be accompanied by data on the way in which these measures derive from specific contexts. Global

aggregate measures of empowerment such as SDG5 should be complemented at the national level with context-specific direct measures. Indirect measures need accompanying information that explains which relevant contextual factors to consider in decision-making.

Both researchers and practitioners face a difficult trade-off between specificity and generalizability. Findings from across the GrOW program suggest that WEE measures should be closely mapped to a conceptual framework and allow for the possibility of benchmarking their context-specific indicators against a more generalizable set. Doing so will likely trigger new and innovative approaches to measurement and foster cross-disciplinary dialogue.

This Brief was prepared by Arjan de Haan and Mary O'Neill. It is based on the experience of 14 projects in the GrOW program, and the review by Sonia Laszlo and Kate Grantham at McGill University. The latter is documented in Working Papers No. 08 and No.12 and Policy Brief No. 05 in the McGill GrOW Research Series (<http://grow.research.mcgill.ca/>)



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