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Abstract

As we move from the concept of empowerment to its measurement, it is natural that the complexity in the concept passes into its empirical expression in multiples. The problem is compounded as the concept is a multidimensional one. Several different efforts have been made in recent years to develop comprehensive frameworks delineating the various dimensions of women empowerment. The two types of indicators used almost universally in the empirical literature to operationalize empowerment at the individual or household level are those measuring domestic decision-making, and those measuring either access to, or control over resources. Often, these two aspects merge since indicators on domestic decision-making tend to focus heavily on financial and resource allocation matters. The emphasis on such measures in the empirical literature corresponds well with the emphasis on resources and agency in the conceptual literature, as well as with the frequent equation of empowerment with choice, control, and power. Certainly, there is an intuitive appeal to decision-making and control as signifying important aspects of agency.

The present paper seeks to dissect this methodological discourse by listing the essential elements of the empowerment frameworks developed in selected studies and culling out the indicators frequently used to operationalize empowerment at the individual or household level in the empirical studies.

Measuring Women Empowerment: Dissecting the Methodological Discourse

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1 Introduction

In an epistemic quest we have undertaken earlier (Pillai and Asalatha 2012), we have explored the definitions of empowerment and discussed the concept from different perspectives of power, feminism and personal autonomy and agency in the family framework. We have considered three approaches: theory of human needs, self-determination theory and capability approach. The present paper is a natural addendum.

The concept of women empowerment was the outcome of several important critiques and debates generated by the women's movement throughout the world, and particularly in the developing countries. In essence, the 1980s saw the rise of stringent feminist critiques of development strategies and grassroots interventions: mainly for these strategies having generally failed to make any significant dent in the status of women. The failure was ascribed to the adaptation and the application of such approaches as welfare, antipoverty, and to some extent the efficiency approach. Presently, the users of the term 'empowerment' tend to assume an understanding of the meaning within some particular context. Often no clear explanation of empowerment is given. We believe that some of the confusion arises because the root concept – power –itself is disputed, and so is understood and experienced in different ways by different people. In fact, the underlying assumption of many interest groups or institutions (such as the World Bank and the UN) unfortunately is that economic empowerment automatically converts to women's empowerment.

The present paper discusses the issues in measuring empowerment; here we list the essential elements of the empowerment frameworks developed in selected studies and cull out the indicators frequently used to operationalize empowerment at the individual or household level in the empirical studies.

2. The Methodological Discourse

As we move from the concept of empowerment to its measurement, it is natural that the complexity in the concept passes into its empirical expression in multiples. The problem is compounded as the concept is a multidimensional one. As early as 1981, Acharya and Bennett noted that status is a function of the power attached to a given role, and because women fill a number of roles, it may be misleading to speak of “the status of women” (Acharya and Bennett 1981: 3). In another early study, Mason (1986) pointed out that the phenomenon of gender inequality is inherently complex, that men and women are typically unequal in various ways, and that the nature or extent of their inequality in different settings can vary across these different dimensions (as well by social setting and stage in the life cycle). Since that time, a number of studies have shown that women may be empowered in one area of life while not in others (Malhotra and Mather 1997; Kishor 1995; 2000b; Hashemi *et al.* 1996; Beegle *et al.* 1998). Thus it cannot be assumed that if a development intervention promotes women’s empowerment in a particular dimension, empowerment in other dimensions will necessarily follow. It may or may not.

Several different efforts have been made in recent years to develop comprehensive frameworks delineating the various dimensions of women empowerment. In Table 1, we present the essential elements of the empowerment frameworks developed in selected studies. These frameworks employ different levels of specificity. For example, the CIDA (1996) framework includes four broad dimensions of empowerment (legal, political, economic and social empowerment), while Kishor’s (2000a) framework includes broad (e.g. valuation of women, equality in marriage) as well as specific (e.g. lifetime exposure to employment) elements. On the other hand, Pillai and Alkire (2007) is one among a few studies that use both objective and perceived indicators of agency.

Table 1:
Indicators of empowerment proposed in selected studies

Acharya and Bennet (1983)	Household decision-making
Schuler and Hashemi (1994)	Economic security, Mobility, Ability to make small and larger purchases and major decisions, Subjection to domination and violence, Political/legal awareness, and Participation in protests campaigns
Lokshin and Ravallion (2005)	Perceived Global Empowerment (nine-steps Cantil power-ladder)
Alsop and Heinsohn (2005)	<p>Psychological assets</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Self-perceived exclusion from community activities; level of interaction/sociability with people from different social groups; capacity to envisage change, to aspire</p> <p>Informational assets</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Journey time to nearest working post office; journey time to nearest working telephone; frequency of radio listening; frequency of television watching; frequency of newspaper reading; passable road access to house (by periods of time); perceived changes in access to information; completed education level</p> <p>Organizational assets</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Membership of organizations; effectiveness of group leadership; influence in selection of group leaders; level of diversity of group membership</p> <p>Material assets</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">Land ownership; tool ownership; ownership of durable goods; type of housing</p> <p>Financial assets</p>

	<p>Employment history; level of indebtedness; sources of credit; household expenses; food expenditure; occupation</p> <p>Human assets</p> <p>Literacy levels; numeracy levels; health status</p>
Gupta, and Yesudian (2006)	Household autonomy, mobility, and attitudes toward gender and towards domestic violence
Kamal and Zunaid (2006)	<p>Whether women are able to spend their money on their own.</p> <p>Woman's decision- making ability</p> <p>Woman's mobility</p>
Allendorf (2007)	<p>Total number of decisions in which a woman usually has the final say alone or jointly in:</p> <p>her own health care,</p> <p>making large household purchases;</p> <p>making household purchases for daily needs, and</p> <p>visiting family, friends, and relatives</p>
Pillai and Alkire (2007)	<p>Agency in</p> <p>Education of children</p> <p>Employment</p> <p>Household duties</p> <p>Health care</p> <p>Intra-household decision making (household expenditure, education expenditure, political participation, marriage choices, religious beliefs, health care expenditure)</p> <p>Mobility</p> <p>Organisational assets</p> <p>Aspiration</p> <p>Perceived Global Empowerment (power-ladder)</p> <p>View on one's own destiny</p>

The two types of indicators used almost universally in the empirical literature to operationalize empowerment at the individual or household level are those measuring domestic decision-making, and those measuring either access to, or control over resources. Often, these two aspects merge since indicators on domestic decision-making tend to focus heavily on financial and resource allocation matters.

The emphasis on such measures in the empirical literature corresponds well with the emphasis on resources and agency in the conceptual literature, as well as with the frequent equation of empowerment with choice, control, and power. Certainly, there is an intuitive appeal to decision-making and control as signifying important aspects of agency.

In our basic definition of empowerment drawn from Kabeer (2001), ‘strategic life choices’ would refer to decisions that influence a person’s life trajectory and subsequent ability to exercise autonomy and make choices. Examples include decisions related to marriage, education, employment, and childbearing. One argument is that as such strategic choices are likely to take place relatively infrequently in a person’s life, it is often difficult to link them with policy and program interventions unless the time frame of the research is very long. Given the measurement constraints imposed by the infrequency of strategic life choices in an individual’s life, it almost becomes necessary to consider ‘small’ actions and choices if measuring empowerment in the short term. Indeed, given their scope, most household level studies that have included indicators of women’s empowerment have not focused on strategic life choices but, rather, on what might be termed ‘empowerment in small things’.

There is some published evidence from empirical studies that the assumption that the ability to make strategic life choices is linked with the ability to make smaller decisions is valid, but results from other studies suggest that this is not always the case. It is not easy to judge from the existing body of research to what extent the negative results are due to inadequate study designs and imprecise measurement, due to the multi-dimensional or contextual nature of empowerment, or simply the lack of implementing a

research design for measurement across time. For example, it is often not easy for researchers to know whether they have included all the relevant small or large decisions that are likely to matter for women in specific circumstances—the relevance of decisions is often specific to the community context, as well as ethnic and socio-economic status. Moreover, it is difficult to assign relative weights to the importance of decisions that are included in an analysis: decision-making power over cooking is unlikely to be equivalent to decision-making power over children's schooling or health, or marriage, but empirical studies often rely on additive indices of domestic decision-making.

Similarly, the allocation and control of resources can be murkier than they appear at first sight. For example, Kabeer (2001) points out a lack of conceptual rigor in many quantitative studies in their operational definitions of access to and control over resources, both of which are often measured based on questions about women's involvement in decisions related to various household expenditures and management of money. The extent to which such decision-making merely reflects women's implementation of the tasks relegated to them by convention remains a question. On the other hand, studies also show that the fact that a woman brings resources into the home or marriage may strengthen her position in the household, even if she exercises little control over the resource. For example, a woman's assets at marriage or participation in a micro-credit program may help establish her bargaining position in the conjugal relationship even if the actual resource utilization is in the hands of her husband (Hashemi et al. 1996).

Freedom of movement is another common indicator in empirical research at the individual/household level, especially in studies on South Asia where women's presence in the public sphere is often severely constrained. In some circumstances, freedom of movement could be seen as an empowerment resource, an enabling factor for women's agency in other areas of life. On the other hand, taking the initiative to work outside the home or bring a sick child to a health center could be seen as a form of agency in a setting where female claustration is the norm. Few studies have made qualitative efforts to tease out precisely how increased freedom of movement either facilitates or reflects the process of empowerment.

At the individual and household levels, other important indicators of empowerment have been used, but much less frequently in the empirical literature we reviewed. Within the domestic domain, for example, the 'relative' value of a woman's economic contribution is used much less often than the simple fact that she brings in an income or has control over resources. Kabeer (1997) discusses the shifts in women's importance in the family because of the weight of their earnings in her qualitative study of factory workers in Bangladesh. Similarly, despite the extensive literature on the importance of time use and the domestic division of labor for defining women's life options and domestic power in developed country settings, these indicators are rarely incorporated in research on empowerment for developing country settings. Acharya and Bennett (1983) demonstrate a relationship between time spent in market versus non-market activities and women's decision-making power. In addition, using the Indonesia Family Life Survey, Frankenberg and Thomas (2001) are able to incorporate time use in their recent analysis of domestic decision-making and power, mainly due to the unusually rich data available through this source.

Inclusion of indicators on couple communication has been limited largely to studies on contraceptive use, while efforts at measuring sexual negotiation and communication have only begun to gain legitimacy with emerging research on HIV/AIDS. Wolff et al.'s (2000) analysis of condom use in Uganda considers women's ability to negotiate and discuss sexual relations. In the same vein, it is only recently that studies on empowerment have started to include measures on physical violence or threat, even though it is clear that physical or sexual intimidation is of critical importance defining one's ability to make strategic life choices. Rao (1998) finds wife beating to be a key determinant of children's caloric intake in India. Qualitative studies (Kabeer 1997; 1998) often find physical violence and threats of abandonment to be central elements in processes which shape women's disempowerment, but Schuler et al.'s (1996) work in Bangladesh and Jejeebhoy's (2000) study of women's autonomy in India represent the limited quantitative efforts at incorporating this element within a comprehensive conceptual framework of empowerment.

Similarly, there are valiant, but only sporadic efforts in the literature at capturing empowerment indicators for social capital and support, or women's engagement in

public spaces and processes (economic, social, and political), again emerging more from qualitative rather than quantitative studies (Mayoux 2001). Although several household surveys measure contextual indicators at the community level, few consider the possibility of measuring individual women’s engagement in community or political processes. Hashemi et al. (1996) include women’s political and legal awareness and political participation, while Kabeer (1998) includes confidence in community interactions in their separate analyses of microcredit and women’s empowerment in Bangladesh. Although not thoroughly reviewed here, qualitative studies have delved into the emotional and psychological spheres by asking women about their sense of self-worth or value to others (Kabeer 1997; 1998).

We synthesize and list, in Table 2, the most commonly used dimensions of women’s empowerment, drawing from the frameworks developed by these various authors. Allowing for overlap, these frameworks suggest that women’s empowerment needs to occur along the following dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, legal, political, and psychological. However, these dimensions are very broad in scope, and within each dimension, there is a range of sub-domains within which women may be empowered. So, for example, the ‘socio-cultural’ dimension covers a range of empowerment sub-domains, from marriage systems to norms regarding women’s physical mobility, to non-familial social support systems and networks available to women. Moreover, in order to operationalize these dimensions, one should consider indicators at various levels of social aggregation -- the household and the community, as well as regional, national and even global levels. In the table we group commonly used and potentially useful indicators within various “arenas” or spheres of life. Some of these indicators have been suggested within the frameworks referenced above, while others are a first effort on our part to ‘flesh out’ this schematic for application in development assistance contexts.

Table 2: Commonly used dimensions of empowerment and potential operationalization in the household, community, and broader arenas.

Dimension	Household	Community	Broader Arenas
Economic	Women’s control over	Women’s access to	Women’s

	income; relative contribution to family support; access to and control of family resources	employment; ownership of assets and land; access to credit; involvement and/or representation in local trade associations; access to markets	representation in high paying jobs; women CEO's; representation of women's economic interests in macro-economic policies, state and federal budget
Socio-Cultural	Women's freedom of movement; lack of discrimination against daughters; commitment to educating daughters	Women's visibility in and access to social spaces; access to modern transportation; participation in extra-familial groups and social networks; shift in patriarchal norms (such as son preference); symbolic representation of the female in myth and ritual	Women's literacy and access to a broad range of educational options; Positive media images of women, their roles and contributions
Familial/ Interpersonal	Participation in domestic decision-making; control over sexual relations; ability to make childbearing decisions, use contraception, access abortion; control over spouse selection and marriage timing; freedom from domestic violence	Shifts in marriage and kinship systems indicating greater value and autonomy for women (e.g. later marriages, self selection of spouses, reduction in the practice of dowry; acceptability of divorce); local campaigns against domestic violence	Regional/national trends in timing of marriage, options for divorce; political, legal, religious support for (or lack of active opposition to) such shifts; systems providing easy access to contraception, safe abortion, reproductive health services
Legal	Knowledge of legal rights; domestic support	Community mobilization for rights;	Laws supporting women's rights,

	for exercising rights	campaigns for rights awareness; effective local enforcement of legal rights	access to resources and options; Advocacy for rights and legislation; use of judicial system to redress rights violations
Political	Knowledge of political system and means of access to it; domestic support for political engagement; exercising the right to vote	Women's involvement or mobilization in the local political system/campaigns; support for specific candidates or legislation; representation in local bodies of government	Women's representation in regional and national bodies of government; strength as a voting bloc; representation of women's interests in effective lobbies and interest groups
Psychological	Self-esteem; self-efficacy; psychological well-being	Collective awareness of injustice, potential of mobilization	Women's sense of inclusion and entitlement; systemic acceptance of women's entitlement and inclusion

Source: Malhotra et al. (2012: Table 1)

2. Difficulties in Measuring a 'Process'

Many writers describe empowerment as a 'process', as opposed to a condition or state of being, a distinction that we have emphasized as a key defining feature of empowerment. However, as 'moving targets', processes are difficult to measure, especially with the standard empirical tools available to social scientists. In this section we discuss the major methodological challenges in measuring the process of women's empowerment,

including the use of direct measures as opposed to proxy indicators, the lack of availability and use of data across time, the subjectivity inherent in assessing processes, and the shifts in relevance of indicators over time.

Some authors who have made efforts at empirically measuring empowerment have argued that as a process, it cannot be measured directly, but only through proxies such as health, education level, knowledge (Ackerly 1995). For example, Kishor (2000a) has argued that while the end product of empowerment can be measured through direct indicators, the process can only be measured through proxies such as education and employment. Several large-scale studies of relationships between gender and economic or demographic change have used proxy variables. However, an increasing body of research indicates that commonly used proxy variables such as education or employment are conceptually distant from the dimensions of gender stratification that are hypothesized to effect the outcomes of interest in these studies, and may in some cases be irrelevant or misleading (Mason 1995:8-11; Govindasamy and Malhotra 1996). Studies have found that the relevance of a proxy measurement of women's empowerment may depend on the geographic region (Jejeebhoy 2000), the outcome being examined (Kishor 2000a), or the dimension(s) of empowerment that is of interest (Malhotra and Mather 1997).

In response, there have been increasing efforts at capturing the process through direct measures of decision-making, control, choice, etc. Such measures are seen as the most effective representations of the process of empowerment by many authors since they are closest to measuring agency (Hashemi et al. 1996; Mason 1998; Mason and Smith 2000; Malhotra and Mather 1997). It could be argued that the indicators with 'face validity' (i.e. indicators of empowerment based on survey questions referring to very specific, concrete actions) represent power relationships and are meaningful within a particular social context.

Ideally, the best hope of capturing a process is to follow it across at least two points in time. Moreover, the gap in time required to measure the process may depend on the nature and extent of change in empowerment. Depending on the dimension of empowerment, the context, and the type of social, economic, or policy catalyst, women

may become empowered in some aspects of their lives in a relatively short period of time (say 1-3 years) while other changes may evolve over decades. For policy and programmatic action, specifying the aspects of women's empowerment that are expected to change as well as the 'acceptable' time period for change is critical in defining success or failure. As conceptual frameworks and indicators of empowerment become more sophisticated, however, there is an enormous problem with regard to the availability of adequate data across time. For example, while there is increasing agreement that measures with 'face validity' are preferable to 'proxy' indicators, survey data that include 'face validity' measures are often one-of-a-kind attempts, and are not systematically or routinely collected across more than one point in time.

Qualitative studies of empowerment make an effort at capturing the process through in depth interviews and case studies which follow the life changes for specific women (and men) through retrospective narratives. Gita Sen (1993) has suggested that the process of empowerment is essentially qualitative in nature. Even indicators such as women's participation in power structures like the political system are still often inadequate in telling us whether empowerment is occurring without a qualitative sense of what that representation is like or what it means (Oxaal and Baden 1997). Kabeer's work (1997) suggests that the assessment of the process is not only qualitative, but subjective as well. According to Kabeer (1997; 1998), the subjectivity of the process should also extend to measuring empowerment in terms of women's own interpretation; rather than relying on what is valued by the evaluators of programs, the process of empowerment should be judged as having occurred if it is self-assessed and validated by women themselves.

Another complicating factor in assessing the empowerment process is that the behavioral and normative frontiers that define appropriate indicators for measuring empowerment are constantly evolving. The 'meaning' of a particular behavior within a particular socio-cultural context (whether it signifies empowerment and whether it is influenced by empowerment) is likely to change over time, and it may change very rapidly. As a result, the relevance of specific indicators will change over time and according to the level of analysis. Data from the early 1990's suggested that in rural Bangladesh empowered women were more likely than others to use contraception (Schuler et al. 1997). Now contraceptive use is the norm – over half of all married, reproductive age women

currently use it and more than three quarters have used it at one time or another. Once a behavior becomes the accepted norm there is little reason to expect that it would be influenced by an individual actor's level of empowerment.

At the individual level, the case could be made that individual empowerment should be measured as a function of the distance between the individual's behavior and the community norm. This would be true of indicators such as 'ability to move about one's village' or 'ability to visit a health center without getting permission'. However, an indicator that is no longer a good marker of empowerment at the individual level within a community may still be a good indicator for distinguishing relative levels of empowerment between communities, as long as some variation within the larger society persists.

Conclusion

We have seen that empowerment is generally conceived as a multidimensional process, which operates at different and interlinked levels and is based on an analysis of power relations. Power therefore is often related to our ability to make others do what we want, regardless of their own wishes or interests (see Weber, 1922). Usually as illustrated above, many social scientists associate power with influence, domination and control, and often treat power as a commodity or structure divorced from human action. Envisaged in this way, power can be viewed as unchanging or unchangeable. Nonetheless, power exists within the context of a relationship between people, families and communities. Besides, empowerment is a social process, since it occurs in relationship to others. By implication, since power is created in relationships, power and power relationships can change. Therefore, the concept of empowerment also depends upon power that can expand, change or identify in a different medium. Thus, understanding power as zero-sum, as something that you get at somebody else's expense, reduces the complexity of power and empowerment for that matter. Empowerment as a process of change, then, becomes a meaningful concept. There is no doubt that empowerment has a broader meaning and can be perceived differently. An empowered woman is one who has control of the decision-making, which impacts on the day-to-day wellbeing of her family. This concept of empowerment is entirely different from individualistic personal autonomy as presented by the DAWN in the 1980s. We have

further pointed out that these power relations function in different spheres of life (for instance in economic, social, and political spheres) and at different levels such as individual, household, community, and institutional.

Though the feminist theoretical analyses indicate that empowerment is a useful concept because it emphasizes the idea of women as active agents rather than passive recipients of development strategies, it is conceptually complex and methodologically challenging to measure and analyze, especially in the context of assessing the effectiveness of particular interventions. Although empowerment through income-generating activities has attracted various critiques, it cannot be discounted that in some cases microcredit stimulates or sustains an enterprise's growth. However, often women accessing microcredit schemes show little awareness and readiness to challenge gender inequality, patriarchy, and lack of control over their personal and community resources. As Izugbara (2004) points out, the empowerment that the scheme promotes rarely goes beyond marginal improvement in small areas of women's life, with its limited resources and within the conditions permitted by local patriarchal structures and institutions. The inherently complex and potentially conflict-ridden nature of empowerment itself means that any intervention, whether a microcredit scheme or other measures, will inevitably make only a limited contribution in isolation.

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