Helpdesk Research Report: Measuring and Evaluating Women’s Economic Empowerment

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**Query:** What types of measures are currently being used to measure and evaluate women’s economic empowerment (focusing particularly on studies on South Asia – especially Bangladesh and Nepal)? Provide a summary of these measures and, if available, critical appraisal of their application. Provide a broader summary of the current critiques and views on approaches to measuring women's economic empowerment.

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1. Overview

Women’s economic empowerment is a complex process involving improvements in the economic resources and skills available to them, their access to economic institutions, their ability to make decisions for themselves, and the degree of control they possess over key resources (Kabeer 2001, McDevitt 2010, Golla et al 2011, Mahmud et al 2011). The next section of this report provides a summary of the key types of measures for measuring and evaluating women’s economic empowerment, drawing on a comprehensive overview of this topic by Golla et al (2011) before highlighting some studies of women’s economic empowerment in Bangladesh and Nepal. Section three provides some critical appraisal of the application of these measures, based on these studies and the broader literature. It highlights issues surrounding the concept of women’s empowerment, the need to use a range of measures, and the use of universal indicators. Section four provides a summary of current critiques and views on different approaches to measuring women’s economic empowerment, addressing three key issues in the literature – the use of participatory approaches, randomised control trials, and women’s empowerment indexes.
In an earlier GSDRC survey of the literature on measuring women’s economic empowerment McDevitt (2010, p.2) finds that ‘there is no standard definition of women’s economic empowerment and the term is often used loosely’. Golla et al (2011, p.4) define women’s economic empowerment in the following way:

*A woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability to succeed and advance economically and the power to make and act on economic decisions.*

Golla et al (2011, p. 4) argue that women’s economic empowerment comes in two parts: ‘To *succeed and advance economically*, women need the skills and resources to compete in markets, as well as fair and equal access to economic institutions. To *have the power and agency* to benefit from economic activities, women need to have the ability to make and act on decisions and control resources and profits’.

In the diagram below they show how economic empowerment is made up of two inter-related components: 1) economic advancement and 2) power and agency. ‘Both components are connected, and both are necessary to achieve better lives for women and their families. Economic gain and success (economic advancement) promote women’s power and agency. At the same time, when a woman is able to control and share in resource use (power) and to define and make choices (agency), she is better able to advance economically’ (Golla et al 2011, p.4).
2. Summary of Measures

Women’s economic empowerment programmes can follow a number of different pathways (Golla et al 2011). They can aim to enhance the resources available to women, redefine norms and institutions, or build women’s power and agency. Programmes and projects can also target different levels – working at the individual, household or organization level, or at the level of communities or social networks (Golla et al 2011).

Golla et al (2011) present a framework for measuring women’s economic empowerment, which uses sample indicators to show different stages at which results can be measured. The stages range of immediate outputs and outcomes to longer-term impacts. Agency/power and economic advancement can be measured separately.

![Figure 3: A Framework to Measure Women's Economic Empowerment](image)

This framework emphasises that measuring process indicators (outputs and outcomes) is as important as focusing on impact indicators. These indicators can provide initial assessments of whether a project is ‘on the right track’ (Golla et al 2011).

Golla et al (2011) present an extensive selection of indicators for measuring and evaluating women’s economic empowerment in three key areas:

- Reach and Process Indicators
- Power and Agency Indicators
- Economic Advancement Indicators
Examples of indicators from each of these areas are provided below:

**Reach and Process Indicators**

| Participation | Number of women and men who participated in different activities  
| | What barriers kept women from participating?  
| | How were participants selected? Did the selection process itself exclude any kinds of women (or other kinds of groups)?  
| | Number of those selected who did/did not participate.  
| | Number of women who started activities and then dropped out. What are the reasons given for dropping out?  
| | Which women are participating and which aren’t?  
| Issues faced by women | How did the community respond to the activities? To women’s participation?  
| | What are women’s families’ reactions to the project?  
| Success | Could women effectively implement project activities? (e.g. for a training, could they understand the training materials? For business activities, could they adopt suggested changes in business practice?)  
| | Were women successful in the activity? (e.g. For a training, did they master the material? For a new technology, did they adopt it?)  
| Unintended outcomes | Did the project have any positive outcomes that were not expected?  
| | Beyond the project participants, is there evidence that others benefitted indirectly or unexpectedly from the project?  
| | What negative unintended outcomes have project teams observed?  
| | Was anyone worse off because of the project, whether they participated or not?  
| | Has there been any sort of participant or community backlash? Of what nature?  

**Power and Agency Indicators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual/Household Level</th>
<th>Community/Institution Level</th>
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</table>
| **Control over assets** | Women’s ownership of productive assets (land, animals, machinery)  
| | Women have their own source of income  
| | Share of household income provided by women  
| | Women have control over how to spend some cash or savings  
| **Agency/Decision-making** | Proportion of women’s income spent on herself and children  
| | Women’s involvement in major household decisions, i.e. large purchases (car, house, household appliance), agricultural decisions  
| | Women’s access to information and technology  
| | Laws that protect women’s property rights  
| | Existing laws are enforced at the community level  
| | Women represented as owners of larger businesses and in business leadership  
| | Use of community resources in ways that benefit women (pumps, clinics, schools, etc.)  
| | Women’s participation in community groups/ associations/networks  
| | Women’s involvement in community decision-making  
| | Women have leadership roles in the community  


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Self-confidence/ self-efficacy</strong></th>
<th>Women’s ability to visit friends, family, associates</th>
<th>Rates of abuse, assault, harassment against women in public spaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women’s ability to use public transportation/travel freely in public spaces</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Women’s use of media, phone, technology</td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Autonomy and Mobility</strong></th>
<th>Psychological wellbeing</th>
<th>Community valuing of women’s entitlement and inclusion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attitudes on own self-esteem</td>
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<td>Articulateness and confidence in speaking with authorities</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Gender Norms</strong></th>
<th>Ability to negotiate sexual and reproductive decisions</th>
<th>Shifts in marriage and kinship systems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attitudes on women and work</td>
<td>Community acceptance of women working</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attitudes on women and mobility</td>
<td>Community attitudes on women’s sexual and reproductive roles women and work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attitudes on women and violence</td>
<td>Community attitudes on women and violence</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Gender Roles/ Responsibilities</strong></th>
<th>Number of hours spent in housework</th>
<th>Sex-disaggregated employment rates by sector</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender segregation of male and female work, ability to enter profitable jobs</td>
<td>Community attitudes on what work women should do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equity of domestic duty load</td>
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### Economic Advancement Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Individual/ Household Level</strong></th>
<th><strong>Community/ Institution Level</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Productivity and Skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Education available to and attained by girls and women</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual educational attainment</td>
<td>Adult learning opportunities available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and work skills</td>
<td>Free entry to markets for buyers and sellers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to productive tools and technologies</td>
<td>Access to new technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to markets (as buyers and sellers)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to jobs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Business Practice</strong></td>
<td><strong>Employment practices</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeps records</td>
<td>Barriers to entry to key jobs and markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separates personal and business expenses</td>
<td>Workplace policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of product line</td>
<td>Earnings/growth at a firm or sector level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing – takes advantage of market opportunities; is not dependent</td>
<td>Women as share of certain jobs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
on one or irregular buyers or suppliers
Invests in business

| Consumption/smoothing risk | Has savings, insurance, or liquid assets | Community has safe places to save
| Does not experience seasonal hunger | Formal or informal social safety nets
| Did not sell productive assets |

| Work environment | Work site is safely accessible for women | Labour laws exist and are enforced
| Work site has separate toilet facility for women | Wage inequality
| Work hours, conditions, and remuneration meet international labour standards |

| Prosperity | Individual and family wealth | Economic status of women in community
| Housing, property, assets | Women's share of assets, business ownership
| Better health and nutrition | Health and nutrition indices |

### Bangladesh

Mahmud et al (2011) measure empowerment in a sample of 3,500 rural women in 128 villages of Bangladesh with four sets of indicators:

- **Self-esteem indicators** – percentage of women who think they should have a say in buying furniture, buying livestock, spending family savings, taking a loan, treatment for sick children, visiting doctor for self, her working outside home, her visiting father’s house, having more children, using family planning etc.

- **Decision making indicators** - percentage of women who have a say in buying furniture etc. (as above).

- **Mobility indicators** – percentage of women who in the last year have visited friends outside the village, visited hospital or clinic.

- **Control over resources** – percentage of women who have money to spend as they wish

Pitt et al (2006) adopt a similar approach in their study of men’s and women’s participation in group-based microcredit programmes on various indicators of women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh. Based on a large household survey conducted in 1998-9, they use a number of indicators that proxy for a woman’s autonomy, decision-making power, and participation in household and societal decision making. 75 indicators are reduced to 10 sets of empowerment factors in the following areas: purchasing resources, transaction management, husband’s behaviour, mobility and networks, activism, finance, fertility and parenting, and household attitudes.

A special evaluation study by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) assessed the extent to which selected microfinance projects had reduced the poverty of rural poor households and improved the socioeconomic status of women in Bangladesh, Philippines and Uzbekistan (ADB 2007). Qualitative tools were used to assess how and to what extent women have been empowered by their participation in the microfinance programme. This study focused on the household level, and focused mainly on the distribution of assets within the household. Discussions with participants revolved
around: (i) the effect of the programme on the asset acquisition and ownership of the client women; (ii) the involvement of client women in the household generation, receipt, and spending of cash; and (iii) the responsibility of women for making expenditure and saving decisions.

**Nepal**

The Expansion of Employment Opportunities for Women Project (EEOW) is a gender-specific employment promotion programme for women in poverty in Nepal (Shrestha 2002). It aimed to improve social and economic conditions by supporting the work of community-based women’s groups, setting up savings and credit systems, providing skills training, improving market linkages and providing technical and financial support to pilot projects in support of national efforts. The project was multi-dimensional and supplemented direct efforts to support economic empowerment with broader social empowerment measures. Evidence of impacts was measured in the following key areas:

**Economic Empowerment**
- Improved resources and assets (incomes, knowledge)
- Improved linkages between producers and the market

**Social Empowerment**
- Improved capabilities (individual’s ability to act, speak out)
- Evidence of empowerment (changes in how public decisions are made, resources are allocated, women interested in standing for local elections).

### 3. Critical Appraisal of their application

**Conceptual issues**

Kabeer defines empowerment as ‘the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability’ (Kabeer 2001, p. 19). She argues that there is a wide gap between this understanding of empowerment and the more instrumentalist definition attached to efforts to measure and quantify empowerment. In her analysis, the ability to exercise choice incorporates three inter-related dimensions: resources (defined broadly to include not only access, but also future claims, to both material and human and social resources); agency (including processes of decision making, as well as less measurable manifestations of agency such as negotiation, deception and manipulation); and achievements (well-being outcomes). She concludes that these three dimensions of choice are indivisible in determining the meaning of an indicator and hence its validity as a measure of empowerment (Kabeer 2001). She stresses that since social and political change is unpredictable and non-linear, it will be difficult to predict. Measurements of empowerment should therefore be careful not to prescribe a particular process of empowerment, since this will violate the essence of empowerment (Kabeer 2001).

**Using a range of indicators**

Kabeer (2001) has argued that while it is relatively easy to measure women’s access to key resources, assessing whether or not women are able to access these goods on terms ‘which respect and promote their ability to define their own priorities and make their own choices’ is more difficult since these issues ‘deal more directly with the renegotiation of power relations and have to be far more sensitive to local cultural nuances’ (Kabeer 2001, p.53). She argues that these aspects ‘have to
be monitored through methodologically pluralist approaches combining quantitative and qualitative data, preferably by grassroots-based organisations’ (Kabeer 2001, p.53).

Since empowerment combines not only observable action, but also the meaning, motivation and purpose attributed to such action, women’s empowerment should be measured across a range of indicators (BRIDGE 2007, Golla et al 2011, Mahmud et al 2011). Quantitative indicators alone may not be sensitive enough to capture the nuances of gendered power relations inherent in empowerment processes; nor can they measure an individual’s (subjective) sense of agency or self-worth. It may be more useful to use more in-depth qualitative methods to understand the socio-cultural context within which social interaction and gender relationships take place (BRIDGE 2007). Mahmud et al (2011, p.611) argue that indicators need to be ‘specified and measured across various dimensions and along different pathways’.

Pitt et al (2006) highlight some issues that arise from using a large number of empowerment indicators in regression analysis. While some studies have used an index approach to address this problem, this can be ‘quite arbitrary because the researcher must choose the weights without reference to theory or data’ (p.799).

Much of the critical literature has focused on the question of whether narrow quantitative measures are sufficient for measuring women’s economic empowerment. McDevitt (2010, p.2) states that ‘the majority of efforts to measure women’s economic empowerment programmes focus primarily on quantitative outcomes - such as increased access to credit or increased business revenue - even where the stated objectives include broader empowerment goals….few succeed in showing that specific aspects of women’s power have actually increased’. As McDevitt (2010) notes, and is widely stated in the literature, positive outcomes in financial terms do not necessarily equate to empowerment (Kabeer 2005) and can even have disempowering effects (Martinez, 2006).

McDevitt’s (2010) assessment is largely supported by the evaluation studies assessed for this report. For example, Mahmud et al (2011) state that in Bangladesh, most evaluations of women’s empowerment programmes have tended to ignore effects on women’s agency, perceptions and attitudes (Mahmud et al 2011). Having said this, some of the studies highlighted in this report (such as Mahmud et al 2011, Pitt et al 2006 and Shrestha 2002), have sought to measure these broader ‘power and agency’ related indicators of women’s economic empowerment. These issues are also widely acknowledged in the wider literature.

**Universal Indicators**

Most studies agree that a universal set of indicators will not be appropriate for every project or context (Golla et al 2011, BRIDGE 2007, Mahmud et al 2011). The specific factors that illustrate progress towards women’s economic empowerment vary between contexts, and may also change over time as countries become more developed (Golla et al 2011). The BRIDGE guide (2007) states that balancing the need for both universal standards to measure empowerment and context-sensitive indicators is a key challenge facing evaluators in this area. Broader-level indicators may be applicable across a range of contexts, while indicators at the community and household level might be adapted for specific contexts (BRIDGE 2007). Mahmud et al (2011, p.613) suggest that ‘self-esteem’ indicators may be considered universal, while ‘role in decision-making, freedom of mobility, and control of material resources are specific to the socio-economic context of rural Bangladesh’. 
4. Approaches to measuring women’s economic empowerment

Participatory Approaches

A number of studies highlight the importance of involving beneficiaries in women’s economic empowerment programmes (Kabeer 2001, ILO 2007, Jupp et al 2010). Jupp et al (2010) developed a participatory approach to measuring empowerment, based on qualitative self-assessment to support a project in Bangladesh. The approach ‘embraces the idea that different aspects of empowerment may be achieved asymmetrically and at a different pace in different contexts’ (Jupp et al 2010, p.16). Their approach has two parts – the first led by insiders, and the second involving collation and analysis of insider-generated date by outsiders. During the first part participants’ perceptions and insights are gathered about the benefits and motivations involved in project participation using participatory rural appraisal (PRA) approaches. In the second part the results of the self assessments are collected and are aggregated to provide reliable quantitative information to donors.

Randomised Control Trials

A growing number of studies have sought to assess women’s economic empowerment using randomised control trials (RCTs). Banerjee et al (2009), for example, assessed whether women made decisions about household spending, investment, savings and education by comparing areas where a microfinance agency had provided loans to women’s groups, and areas where they had not. It also measured health outcomes (whether households spent more on medical care and sanitation, and whether households reported having sick children) and educational outcomes (whether children were at school). It found no differences in decision-making, educational and health outcome indicators the treatment and comparison areas.

Another RCT was conducted to evaluate the Center for Women’s Empowerment Project in Liberia, which aimed to provide self-employment opportunities to disadvantaged young women through skills training, counselling, and a microcredit scheme. (YEN 2009). The evaluation sought to measure the effect of the project on labour market outcomes of trainees and in particular on earnings. Key baseline indicators included the following:

- Labour market outcomes (e.g. employment type, economic activities, income)
- Household assets
- Leadership abilities and empowerment (e.g. participation in community groups)
- Community integration (marital status, incidence of conflicts with neighbours)
- Psychosocial well-being (family connectedness and quality of relations)
- Basic demographic characteristics and parental characteristics
- Initial human capital, especially levels of educational attainment and literacy;
- Initial social capital, including family connectedness, group participation, and the perceived ability to raise funds through kin networks; and
- Entrepreneurial abilities, including current access to loans and management of savings.

Ashraf et al (2009) presents the findings of an RCT that aimed to examine whether access to an individually-held savings product called SEED (Save, Earn and Enjoy Deposit) led to an increase in female decision-making within the household. The study used household surveys to measure empowerment in a number of ways: an inventory of assets, impact on household decision-making (measured by questions about family planning and consumption decisions), impact on savings
attitudes (measured by presenting statements about saving and spending), and impact on economic decisions, such as purchase of durable goods, health and consumption.

An earlier GSDRC report on the suitability of RCTs for accountability and empowerment programmes (Walton 2011) highlighted a number of difficulties associated with their use in this area:

- **Scale**: Most evaluations focus at the village or neighbourhood level, while most empowerment processes involve higher-order institutions and actions.

- **Context**: The unique characteristics of the village or neighbourhood can interfere with the ability to generalize from micro-level results. This issue of ‘external validity’ is arguably the central weakness of RCTs in development.

- **Complexity**: Empowerment programmes tend to combine a range of activities targeted at a number of levels. As a result it is often difficult to decide on the appropriate frame for random assignment. If the intervention targets a bundle of activities, it is often difficult to determine the impact of individual activities.

- **Time Frame**: Experiments take place in real time, which can make it difficult to use RCTs to measure long-term processes. Many empowerment processes occur over long time frames.

- **Theoretical Gap**: Most studies do not sufficiently explain why an intervention has or has not worked, which limits their relevance to other contexts.

**Women’s Empowerment Indexes**

In a seminal study, Ibrahim and Alkire (2009) proposed indicators that could be added to individual or household surveys to generate internationally comparable data on empowerment. They argue that by using such data, researchers could improve understanding of connections between variables (such as empowerment and income, governance, health and nutrition outcomes) in different contexts and of their durability over time. The proposed indicators include: control over personal decisions; domain-specific autonomy; household decision-making; and the ability to change aspects of one's life at the individual and communal levels. The indicators proposed concern four possible exercises of agency, the increase of which could lead to empowerment: choice, control, change and communal belonging.

There have been a number of attempts to establish global empowerment indexes. The UNDP, for example, has established the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) as a tool for determining ‘whether women and men are able to actively participate in economic and political life and take part in decision-making’ (UNDP 1995, p. 73). The GEM uses three basic indicators:

- Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments
- Percentage of women in economic decision making positions (incl. administrative, managerial, professional and technical occupations)
- Female share of income (earned incomes of males vs. females).

More recently the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), in partnership with USAID and the International Food Policy Research Institute has developed the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI). The Index is composed of two sub-indexes: ‘one
measures the five domains of empowerment for women, and the other measures gender parity in empowerment within the household. It is an aggregate index reported at the country or regional level that is based on individual-level data on men and women within the same households’ (IFPRI 2012, p.2).

‘Five domains of empowerment (5DE): This sub-index assesses whether women are empowered across the five domains examined in the WEAI. For the women who are disempowered, it also shows the percentage of domains in which they meet the required threshold and thus experience “sufficiency.” The 5DE sub-index captures women’s empowerment within their households and communities’ (IFPRI 2012, p.2). The five domains are (1) decisions about agricultural production, (2) access to and decision-making power over productive resources, (3) control over use of income, (4) leadership in the community, and (5) time use.

‘Gender Parity Index (GPI): This sub-index reflects the percentage of women who are as empowered as the men in their households. For those households that have not achieved gender parity, the GPI sub-index shows the gap that needs to be closed for women to reach the same level of empowerment as men. Using a survey method that goes beyond the traditional practice of interviewing only a household “head” (often a male) to interview both a principal male and a principal female, the GPI allows Feed the Future and others to compare the agricultural empowerment of men and women living in the same household.

Based on both sub-indexes, the WEAI is thus an aggregate index that shows the degree to which women are empowered in their households and communities and the degree of inequality between women and men within the household’ (IFPRI 2012, p.2).

5. References


6. Additional Information

**Key websites:**
International Centre for Research on Women http://www.icrw.org/
Pathways of Women’s Empowerment http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/

**About Helpdesk research reports:** Helpdesk reports are usually based on 3.5 days of desk-based research. They are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues, and a summary of some of the best literature available. Experts are contacted during the course of the research, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged.