

Theoretical and Definitional Basis for Identification of Measures of Gender Equality and Empowerment

EMERGE [Evidence-based Measures of Empowerment for Research on Gender Equality] is a new project focused on measurement of gender equality and empowerment for development, and health program monitoring and evaluation in India, and for consideration of state or national indicators to monitor progress on UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: To Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Girls. UN Women reports that 80% of indicators to monitor SDG5 lack adequate data (UN Women, 2016); this is partially due to the lack of valid measures for a number of gender equity constructs (e.g., forced marriage) and inadequate science on many existing measures across populations and contexts. To shift the field forward, focus on measurement is needed, but a necessary first step toward this goal is establishment of shared definitions of gender equity, equality and empowerment. To that end, we offer the following:

Gender equality is the state in which rights, responsibilities and opportunities for people are unaffected by gender (UN Women Gender Equality Glossary). This definition, based on a human rights framework, is similar to the definition of **gender equity** within the public health field, in which it is recognized as a type of social equity. Social equity is described by Whitehead (1992) as indicated by *numeric* equality in distribution of *mutable* resources (tangible and intangible), socially valued goods and services, opportunities, capital (both social and financial), compensation and reward, or well-being, and in a way that is recognized as fair and just. For both the UN based definition of gender equality and the public health definition of gender equity, determination of what is equal or fair and just is not based on an assessed choice or preference of the individual assessed, but rather the opinion of the objective researcher who must consider a) if the situation is better overall for both groups and b) if the situation is more just or moral (Sen, 2002). For the purpose of this work, we will use the UN defined term gender equality, to conform to the SDG definitions, but borrow from the public health definition of gender equity to help guide how to operationalize it for measurement.

With consideration of the definitions above, measurement of gender inequalities will be indicated by assessment of both unequal distribution of these same mutable valued factors (resources, socially valued goods, opportunities, rewards, and well-being), advantaging males over females and transgender people, and unjust access, situations or opportunities for females (or transgender individuals) due to their sex. With regard to unequal distribution based on sex, the underlying assumption is that this inequality is attributable to discrimination or exclusion based on gender, but this does not have to be proven for an observed difference to be identified as a gender inequality or inequity. Such an approach may be important in contexts where there is low consciousness of gender bias or the inherent problems that can arise from them. This approach allows, for example, gender-based age differentials in marriage to be identified as an inequality when seen as a pattern, even if neither spouse reported unjust gendered reasons for the differential in age. It must be recognized that the mutable factors of gender inequalities are inextricably inter-related, and may be viewed differently in terms of where they fall in a causal pathway depending upon which sector is considering them; for example, gender inequalities in education (e.g., unequal distribution in school enrollment or attendance or completion) may be viewed as a predictor of gender inequalities in labor force participation (e.g., unequal distribution in labor markets, unequal pay for equal work), or gender inequalities in labor force participation may be viewed as predictive of ongoing gender inequities in education. Regardless of the causal pathways hypothesized, it is important to acknowledge that these gender inequalities are often interrelated and interwoven as a result of pervasive, foundational inequalities that permeate the social environment. Further, they are exacerbated in a context of intersection with other social inequalities, such as income level, education, rural residence, or caste/class.

Gender empowerment is a form of social empowerment, which has been defined by the United Nations Social Development Network (2012) as “an iterative process with key components including an enabling environment that encourages popular participation in decision-making that affects the achievement of goals like poverty eradication, social integration and decent work for all as well as sustainable development.” In the case of gender empowerment, this process is based in a means of change that alters the positioning of those in a lesser position due to their gender (including women and transgender individuals) to allow for autonomy and self-determination. In the context of social empowerment, social structures particularly those related to poverty and political participation are the focus, with the goal of building assets to improve representation and more effective engagement in markets (UN Social Development Network, 2012; World Development, 2001). While these issues are important for gender empowerment as well, household and interfamilial relations are, as Malhotra et al., (2002) states, “a central locus of women’s disempowerment in a way that is not true for other disadvantaged groups.” This point highlights a need for emphasis on inclusion of household and intrafamilial empowerment indicators, not well considered in social empowerment more broadly.

For both gender and social empowerment, the goal is to support the more vulnerable and marginalized group to build consciousness of and agency against demonstrated discrimination (or inequities), create voice collectively and individually against discriminatory institutions or efforts to enact that agency, and create change in circumstance or structure allowing free strategic life choices (Alkire, 2005, 2008; Alsop & Heinson, 2005, Batiwala, 1994; Cornwall, 2016; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Kabeer, 1999, 2011; Malhotra et al., 2002; Samman & Santos, 2009). The steps of the empowerment process include:

- a) *Consciousness that choice exists but is denied* by a power structure (i.e., patriarchy) that operates at multiple levels (individual, family, community, sectoral, and societal) and maintains women and girls, relative to men and boys, as lesser in value, authority, and right to autonomy.
- b) *Aspiration for change in the power structure* in order to have choice and autonomy over strategic life decisions without barriers or negative consequences.
- c) *Giving voice to one’s goals and aspirations* to enact change, using both communication and negotiation.
- d) *Agency to engage in a process of change which involves an individual’s power within* to perceive themselves capable of creating change (self-efficacy), *power to act* to create desired change (autonomy), *power with* others to create and maintain change (collective action or agency), and *power to empower* (social change) others to create change in their own lives via this same empowerment process.
- e) *Access to, control over, and use of assets and opportunity structures* to enact change. Assets include those that are psychological (e.g., ability to envision change), informational (e.g., knowledge of options), organizational (e.g., participation in a self-help group), material (e.g., having a bike), social (e.g., social capital), financial (e.g., income), or human (e.g., literacy, cooking skills). Opportunity structures can be formal (i.e., laws, regulatory structures) or informal (i.e., social norms).
- f) *Resistance against (i.e., in relation to) those with power over them*, with a goal of dismantling the power structure that impedes self-determination. Backlash resistance against those seeking empowerment and by those with power over them can be punitive or even violent in nature.
- g) *Resultant change and subsequent control over one’s own strategic life choices*, with a goal of ensuring self-determination and self-actualization in a context of true choice.

The process of empowerment is multidimensional, cutting across multiple domains; empowerment in one domain may not indicate or result in empowerment in another (Alkire, 2005). Empowerment is culturally and contextually specific, such that, for example, a women’s lower status may impede a given opportunity such as employment in one context and may require it as a low wage earner in another, and can change over time (Malhotra et al., 2002). Empowerment can become more complex in contexts of intersectionality with other social inequities, such as caste/class, race/ethnicity, religion, or rural residence. Thus, the complex process of empowerment as described above is not easily measured via

quantitative assessments and for some domains and constructs may require more participatory qualitative approaches with specificity to the population of focus. Nonetheless, some quantitative measures of empowerment do exist (e.g., mobility, economic autonomy), have been conducted across national contexts and populations, and allow for an analysis of comparability in empowerment and shared perspectives (Malhotra et al., 2002; Alsop & Heinson, 2005).

Dimensions of Gender Empowerment for Quantitative Measurement

- 1) Psychological: Domains are based on perceptions and beliefs at the individual level and can include self-efficacy, resilience, self-determination, self-actualization)
- 2) Social: Domains are about social relationships, participation in social structures, groups or society. These may include access to and use of social resources (including formal and informal education, media and technology), social networks and social support, and social capital; social cohesion; social inclusion, presence and participation in social spaces and with social groups; social mobility and freedom of movement; human security.
- 3) Economic: Domains focus on control over and claim of material and financial resources as well as financial inclusion. These can include wage earning and control over wages, economic decision-making control, holding savings or a bank account, property ownership, production and control of product.
- 4) Legal: Domains focus on awareness and use of laws that protect women from discrimination. These may include rights to property, inheritance, and voting as well as protections against and prosecutions of violence and traditional harms (e.g., dowry, child or forced marriage) against women and girls.
- 5) Political: Domains focus on political participation as a voter and in political leadership, as well as participation and resultant changes attributable to political organizing.
- 6) Health: Domains focus on control over health and health care access, particularly in the areas of reproductive, maternal health and child health. This also includes bodily integrity.
- 7) Household and Intrafamilial Relations- Domains focus on positioning and relationship dynamics within households and families and can include household decision-making, GBV, marital and fertility autonomy, dowry, son preference, distance from/contact with natal family, and sexual satisfaction.
- 8) Environment and Sustainability- Domains focus on exposure or control over exposure to toxins or pollutants, engagement relative to control over agricultural production or other contact with the environment (e.g., fetching or using water resources).
- 9) Time-Poverty- Differentials in time-poverty and reasons for time-poverty by sex. Time distribution by task.

Domains across dimensions can be measured via assessment of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, social norms, behaviors, and experiences with formal structures (policies, inclusion, treatment by systems and structures), and processes of empowerment can be assessed via steps a-g outlined above. [Drawn from Alsop & Heinson, 2005; Malhotra et al., 2002; Pratley, 2016; Klugman & Tyson, 2016].

The above definitions offer guidance in terms of the parameters of the measures we consider for inclusion in our efforts to identify or to develop quantitative measures of gender equality and empowerment at the individual and household levels for both monitoring and evaluation of programs, and of indicators at the state and national levels in India, across the above noted domains (health, social, political, etc.). Our quantitative measures of interest will focus on:

- 1) Unequal distribution of mutable valued resources (tangible and intangible), socially valued goods and services, opportunities, capital (both social and financial), compensation and reward, or well-being.
- 2) Unjust treatment, access, opportunities, control/autonomy
- 3) Process of empowerment: from consciousness of desire/choice, to aspiration for change, to voicing aspirations, to developing and using agency to create change, to resisting control against change, to achieving change.

Equality and empowerment can and do occur in both the individual and the collective.

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