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Measurement of Women's Empowerment in Rural Bangladesh

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Summary. — Women's empowerment is a dynamic process that has been quantified, measured, and described in a variety of ways. We measure empowerment in a sample of 3,500 rural women in 128 villages of Bangladesh with five indicators. A conceptual framework is presented, together with descriptive data on the indicators. Linear regressions to examine effects of covariates show that a woman's exposure to television is a significant predictor of three of the five indicators. A woman's years of schooling is significantly associated with one of two self-esteem indicators and with freedom of mobility. Household wealth has a significant and positive association with a woman's resource control but a significant negative association with her total decision-making score.

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1. INTRODUCTION

With declining population growth rates in many developing countries, the attention of the population and development community has shifted away from fertility reduction and toward maternal and child health (MCH) goals. However, what has not shifted is the belief that women's empowerment is key for attaining both health and population goals. Thus, understanding the relationship between women's empowerment and maternal and child health (MCH) outcomes is an increasing focus of demographic and public health research (Basu & Koolwal, 2005; Bloom, Wypij, & Das Gupta, 2001; Gupta & Yesudian, 2006; Mullany, Hindin, & Becker, 2005; Portela & Santarelli, 2003).

The fact that many women in the developing world are now better able to control fertility does not necessarily mean that they have become more empowered. Despite nearly two decades of empirical research on assessing women's empowerment and measuring empowerment indicators, the process of women's empowerment is still poorly understood. Furthermore, the causal relationship, if any, between women's empowerment and MCH outcomes could be quite different from the relationship between women's empowerment and fertility outcomes. Hence, there is renewed interest in measuring empowerment indicators in a more systematic manner (Narayan-Parker, 2005, Chap. 1).

In this paper, we attempt to measure empowerment of rural women in Bangladesh using a number of selected indicators with data from 128 villages where an NGO health and micro-credit experimental study was conducted. Our objective is to gain a better understanding of the relationships between empowerment indicators and the context or background factors that affect them.

2. BACKGROUND

Although empowerment has now become a familiar and much used term, an adequate and comprehensive definition remains elusive. One problem is that empowerment is a "latent phenomenon" that is not directly observable: its aggregate results or effects may be visible but the internal dynamism is difficult to examine. Empowerment is also often seen only partially, as women's increased autonomy and freedom. However, empowerment also implies additional responsibility; responsibility which may not always lead to be welfare-enhancing outcomes. For example, women's greater mobility and visibility often lead to increased exposure to violence; women's increased role in decision-making may cause men to take less responsibility and even withdraw support for critical decisions like health care seeking. Thus, empowerment brings with it both rights and responsibilities, and may lead to some freedoms being curtailed (see Basu & Koolwal, 2005). It is because the process of empowerment is not without a price that assessing the relationship between empowerment and development outcomes is difficult.

One definition of women's empowerment is "an expansion in the range of potential choices available to women so that actual outcomes reflect the particular set of choices which the women value." (Kabeer, 2001, p. 81). Empowerment is also seen as the process by which the powerless gain greater

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control over their lives, gaining power not over others but to achieve goals and ends (Kishor & Gupta, 2004, p. 694). Thus, exercising choice is seen as gaining power. While the process of empowerment is applicable to both sexes, it is more relevant for women since women's disempowerment is more pervasive as it cuts across class and other social distinctions, and is made more complicated by the fact that household and intra-familial relationships are a major source of women's powerlessness (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005, Chap. 3). Drawing upon the above, and bearing the complexities in mind, empowerment broadly means having increased life options and choices, gaining greater control over one's life, and generally attaining the capability to live the life one wishes to live.

The above definitions imply that empowerment is a dynamic process of change whereby "those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). It is also a process that is more relevant for those who are "powerless" since it entails going from a "disempowered" state to a more "empowered" one. There are several defining elements that are common to the frameworks used to conceptualize the empowerment process (Kabeer, 1999; Kishor & Gupta, 2004). The first defining feature is that of *agency*, which is the "ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438) or the ability to gain control over various aspects of one's life (Kishor & Gupta, 2004, p. 694). The other critical element is access to and control over resources (material, human, and social) that a woman acquires from the multitude of relationships in the various domains of the family, market, and community. By providing the "building blocks" and defining the initial conditions which either support or hinder women's agency, resources determine the trajectory of the empowerment process. Finally, the broader setting that characterizes the circumstances of a woman's life (such as marriage, living arrangements, household wealth, and characteristics of influential family members) shapes the opportunities and choices available to her. All these features are important in any framework for measuring empowerment.

There are a number of measurement issues to consider. First, the empowerment process is not directly observable: it can only be approximated using proxies or indicators. For example, the initial resources that women can draw upon and are considered the prerequisites to exercise of choice, are generally indicated by paid employment, education, and media exposure, but there is no guarantee that these will necessarily translate into agency. Similarly, the ability to exercise choice can only be observed up to a point, since the motivations and purposes behind that choice are not evident. Indicators that have been commonly identified to measure agency have included observable actions like participation in decision-making, financial independence, and freedom of movement. However, as Kabeer (1999) points out, agency can also take forms that incorporate motivations and intentions that are less amenable to measurement, like bargaining and negotiation, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis, and attitudes to or rejection of gender-based subordination of women (Kishor & Gupta, 2004).

Second, empowerment is a multi-dimensional process. Gender inequality exists across different dimensions (social, economic, political, and psychological) and in various domains of women's lives. The causal pathways through which resources are translated into agency can also be varied: material, perceptual, relational, and cognitive (Chen & Mahmud, 1995). If the hypothesis is that increased agency enhances women's well-being by reducing gender inequality in health status, educational status, personal security, and so on, then the causal pathways of influence from agency to favorable outcomes also

need to be identified. In other words, indicators need to be specified and measured across various dimensions and along different pathways. There may be independence in the experience of empowerment across various domains. For example, women may gain greater agency and control within the family sphere without complementary changes in the community or public spheres. On the other hand, empowerment in one dimension can sometimes lead to empowerment in another. For example, women's agency in terms of gaining control over material resources can lead to greater participation in household decision-making.

Third, context is crucial. The particular pathways of change vary from context to context, and even within the same context all women may not experience empowerment within the same dimensions. This is particularly evident in the different ways household wealth and age can shape the empowerment process. Indicators can also be either context specific or universal. An indicator of freedom of mobility, for example, is much more relevant in a patriarchal context, where women are traditionally confined to the home, than in a western context.

Women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh has been empirically examined, primarily with respect to its relationship with access to financial services (Goetz and Gupta, 1996; Pitt and Khandker, 1995; Hashemi, Schuler, & Riley, 1996; Steele, Amin, & Naved, 2001; Kabeer, 2001; Mahmud, 2003). The indicators of empowerment used have been varied: they range from managerial control over loans, accounting knowledge, active use of loans, women's role in household decision-making, magnitude of women's economic contribution, mobility in the public domain, ability to make large and small purchases, ownership of productive assets, freedom from family domination, political awareness, access to household income and male income, and participation in "male" household decisions like purchase of land or productive assets or in crop production decisions. The resources that constitute the determinants (covariates) of women's empowerment identified by these studies were first and foremost participation in a microcredit program and the nature of that participation (type of investment made with the loan, size of loan, years of membership), but other determinants were also identified, such as education, paid employment, mobility in the male-dominated public domain (seen in one study as an initial condition rather than an indicator of the process), and a favorable household attitude. These studies used different conceptual frameworks to examine whether women's access to microcredit led to positive changes in their lives in terms of greater agency, but the "verdict" has not always been clear cut. (For a comprehensive review up to a decade ago, see Kabeer, 2001.) In some of the above studies empowerment indicators have also been used to predict outcomes at the household level, such as consumption levels, value of women's nonland assets, total hours spent by women and men in economic activities in the home, hours spent by women in household work, whether women received treatment when ill, whether children were immunized, the gender gap in education of children, contraceptive use, and exposure to violence.

Missing from these evaluations of the effect of participation in microcredit programs on women's agency and household outcomes is its effect on women's perceptions and attitudes, which constitutes an important dimension of the empowerment process in the conceptual models discussed above. Perception changes are indicated by the extent to which women experience an increase in self-worth and the extent to which there is a decline in acceptance of their lower status relative to men both in the home and in society. Moreover, an independent source of information is an important resource for

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