

Women's economic empowerment and collective action in agriculture: new evidence and measurement challenges

Debates on defining and measuring women's economic empowerment

Development actors increasingly claim that their interventions are contributing to women's economic empowerment, and donors require that monitoring and evaluation systems capture these empowerment outcomes. However, there are divergent views and perspectives among both development policy makers and among grassroots women themselves on what constitutes 'women's economic empowerment' (Kabeer 2012: 7-10; Eyben 2011: 1). Differences relate to whether empowerment is seen as an end in itself, or a means to broader developmental goals; how broadly or narrowly economic the definition is; and whether empowerment is primarily seen as having the ability to 'compete'

in the market, or encompasses the capacity to challenge structural inequalities in the market and beyond (Kabeer *ibid*). Related to this, there is also considerable debate on what measures constitute rigorous or comparable evidence of economic empowerment, and whether it is even possible to 'measure' empowerment across different contexts (Alkire et al. 2012; Okali 2012; Golla et al. 2011; Eyben et al. 2008; Kabeer 1999).

Buvinic et al. (2013), for example, define women's economic empowerment in terms of their ability to access new employment opportunities, improve productivity or increase incomes, and see measures of these as direct quantifiable evidence of economic empowerment. Golla et al. (2011) understand economic empowerment not only as increased

ability to access economic opportunities, but also the capacity or power to make strategic economic choices. Eyben (2011: 3) goes beyond individual capacities, to define economic empowerment as 'women's capacity to contribute to and benefit from economic activities on terms which recognise the value of their contribution, respect their dignity and make it possible for them to negotiate a fairer distribution of returns.' This suggests, drawing on Kabeer (2012; 1999), a collective capacity of women to influence wider social relations and 'structures of constraint' as a central aspect of empowerment.

As part of USAID's Feed the Future initiative the innovative Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) was developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) and launched in 2012, to create a single benchmark against which programme performance could be both assessed and compared by USAID and, potentially, other donors (Alkire et al. 2012). This is a survey-based measure, which uses data gathered at individual and household level to assess a number of different dimensions of empowerment.

Collective action and rural women's economic empowerment

The current focus on women's collective action has many antecedents in a long history of women's organising to promote economic, as well as social and other developmental goals (Sweetman 2013). Since the 1980s, women's groups have been widely used in microfinance, for example, as a mechanism to address their lack of collateral for credit. At the same time, feminists have long emphasised the importance of collective organising among women not only

or even primarily as a mechanism for making economic gains but as a means of developing confidence and identifying common interests (power 'within'), as well as to increase their voice and strengthen their negotiating position in the household, workplace and wider society (power 'to', power 'with') and thus their 'empowerment' (Sweetman *ibid*; Kabeer 2012; 1999; Heyer et al. 2002). The importance that rural women attach to group participation, and its contribution to their sense of empowerment, is underlined in numerous studies (e.g. Action Aid et al. 2012: 3-4; World Bank 2012: 96-7; Charman 2008).

However, there are few rigorous analyses that provide compelling evidence that group participation contributes to women's economic empowerment (Doss et al. 2012). Attempting to address this, recent Oxfam research on women's collective action in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania used both qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate whether women's participation in agricultural marketing groups contributes to their economic empowerment, as well as to wider economic benefits (Baden 2013b)². The experience illustrates some of the methodological and analytical, as well as conceptual challenges of 'measuring women's economic empowerment' and provides insights into the relationship between collective action and economic empowerment.

Oxfam's quantitative survey was designed to identify any association between group membership and economic empowerment outcomes (in addition to wider economic benefits). Controlling for other factors, the study aimed to analyse whether women participating in agricultural marketing groups were more empowered, in terms of their formal ability to take decisions in different economic domains, than women trading in the same sectors individually.

Measuring women's economic empowerment as an outcome of group participation: practical and methodological challenges³

Oxfam researchers adapted elements of the WEAL methodology described above to a research (versus programme evaluation) context, which required some adjustments to the approach.

The first change from the WEAL methodology was to reduce the number of domains and indicators measured, from five in the original index (five domains of empowerment or 5DE) to three which were judged most relevant to collective agricultural marketing, i.e. agricultural production; access to and control over resources; and control and use of income. Given the importance of mobility in marketing, freedom of movement was added to the existing WEAL domains (Vigneri et al. 2013: 9).

The second adjustment related to the WEAL indicator and survey questions on 'relative autonomy' in agricultural production decisions. Conceptually, the WEAL defines empowerment not simply as input into specific economic decisions but also as 'relative autonomy' in decision-making, i.e. an individual's perception of the degree to which they have agency over choices (even if they decide not to be involved in a decision). However, during the survey pilot Oxfam field researchers found that questions designed to test this did not easily elicit the responses desired, perhaps due to limitations of time, or to the inherent complexity of the questions⁵. Therefore, survey questions on this dimension were limited to a focus on formal decision-making.

The third change related to the thresholds at which women are considered empowered.

The WEAL defines 'adequacy' thresholds above which any individual woman can be considered empowered in terms of her autonomy over decision-making, in order to compare levels of empowerment before and after interventions, or across locations. In the WEAL, if women reach adequacy in 80 percent of the indicators, they are considered 'empowered'.

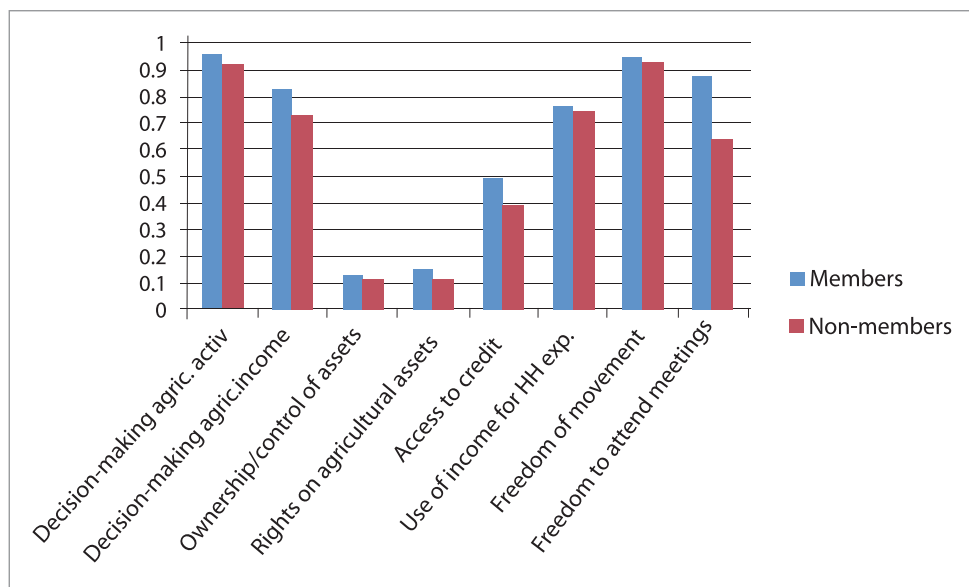
The Oxfam researchers adjusted the WEAL thresholds to fit the context of the study. In practice, this meant that thresholds were raised more often than lowered, leading to a lower percentage of women considered adequate for those particular dimensions of empowerment. Oxfam researchers felt that having only 'some' say in decision-making is not strong enough to denote empowerment: the latter should require either strong influence in decision-making or more areas under women's decision-making.

The limitations of quantitative measurement?

A final challenge was interpreting the results from the quantitative survey analysis. The quantitative analysis found a weak relationship between group membership and economic empowerment overall, with considerable variation across countries.

In Mali, women's group members were found to be more empowered than non-members in the realms of decision-making over agricultural income, access to credit and freedom of movement (see Figure 1). In Tanzania, women's group members appeared to only enjoy more freedom to attend meetings relative to non-members, while the data suggest that non-members have more decision-making power over agricultural assets as well as more rights over agricultural assets. Finally, the study found that in Ethiopia women's group members

Figure 1: Mali – Differences between % of group members and non-members who are 'adequate' on key indicators of women's economic empowerment



have more control of income for household expenditures, but significantly less freedom of movement and less freedom to attend meetings than non-members (Baden 2013b:49-52; Vigneri et al. 2013: 36-42).

Overall, the results of Oxfam's research point to an imperfect and uneven relationship between women's collective action group membership and empowerment domains. While in Mali, group members seem to be more empowered than non-group members in at least some dimensions, this is less the case in Ethiopia and Tanzania. The only dimension where women in groups were significantly more empowered than those not in groups, in all three countries, was access to credit. Neither was there any systematic correlation identified between other characteristics of individual women – in particular wealth and education – and empowerment indicators.

The effects of group membership on empowerment appear to be enhanced where women are also members of informal groups. Sometimes, participation in informal groups (especially rotating savings and credit associations or ROSCAs) has a stronger positive relationship with empowerment than formal group membership. In other cases, formal collective action membership is effective only when women are also members of other informal groups, suggesting that positive synergies exist between different types of association. For access to credit, however, the results suggest that there is a risk of duplicating functions between formal and informal groups (Vigneri et al. 2013: 41-2).

The qualitative research by Oxfam also found that women's longstanding experience in informal groups has beneficial impacts on empowerment outcomes, confirming these quantitative findings. Informal group



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Collective action is helping women farmers in Ethiopia gain in skills and recognition as producers in Ethiopia's Honey value chain and have greater control over incomes.

membership fosters trust and leadership skills necessary for effective functioning of formalised marketing groups, but also provides a mechanism for mobilising savings, developing shared interests, pooling collective resources and amplifying women's collective voice (Pionetti 2012).

Finally, while the study did identify some association between group membership and certain empowerment indicators, it did not establish causality from group membership to empowerment. In fact, the analysis here suggests – at least for Tanzania and Mali – that the relationship between empowerment and group membership works both ways: those who are more economically empowered may be more likely to join groups than those who are less so (Vigneri et al. 2013: 42-4). Kumar and Quisumbing (2010: 1-2) also highlight this challenge in their study of group-based interventions in Bangladesh.

Qualitative insights on empowerment processes

The uneven relationship between women's group participation and their economic empowerment found in the quantitative research was – to some extent – confirmed by qualitative evidence, whereby group members reported that increased control over incomes from agricultural production did not extend to increased control over wider household resources, though there was a perception of decision-making being more 'joint' in some households (Pionetti, 2012: 41).

Nevertheless, qualitative evidence suggests that some women as well as some men perceive women's participation in collective action as offering opportunities for women to redefine their role economically.

...it is now legitimate for women to be struggling to carve out a space for themselves in selected value chains, which was not the case at least in Tanzania and Ethiopia a decade ago. This, in itself, is a significant change. (Pionetti, 2012: 36)

A few instances were documented where renegotiation of household responsibilities with husbands occurred to support women's participation in collective action groups (Baden 2013a: 286). These changes, of course, may be influenced by factors other than collective action, including policy and social change towards greater gender equity (such as increasing emphasis on girl's education or greater mobility of rural women) that have legitimised women's engagement in markets.

The increasing visibility of women's organised economic activities in Mali's Shea butter sector and their growing incomes and capacity to contribute economically to meeting household needs, in a context where men's earnings from cotton production are in decline, were found to have contributed to shifts in perceptions on what are legitimate activities for women. Male community members and village authorities regularly invite women's cooperative members to consultations on community development. The President of the cotton producers' cooperative in N'Gountjina (Koutiala district, Sikasso region) explained that the men in the village now believe that 'Women should always be consulted on important decisions relating to the survival and future of the family'. Women's groups have also successfully negotiated with community leaders to have access to land plots in their villages to establish group Shea butter plantations in order to sustain and expand their activities (Davies 2013: 4).

Limiting the measurement of empowerment to evaluation of individual women's experience may fail to capture collective processes and broader changes in attitudes and perceptions such as those described above. To understand these more fully requires research into how collective organising of women in specific markets contributes to changes in power relations between economic actors in that sector, and to the emergence of new roles for women in local economies and communities.

Implications for research, policy and practice

Empowerment is widely understood as a process, rather than simply an outcome measurable at a point in time, as evaluators often expect. Quantitative measures of empowerment can be useful as a benchmark for evaluating development programmes providing that they build in the flexibility to allow for context specific understandings, using qualitative methods both to inform design and to interpret findings. But quantitative analysis alone cannot capture the complexity of empowerment processes or outcomes: qualitative research and evaluation methods are critical to understanding empowerment as a process.

Quantitative analysis is often and increasingly felt necessary to establish rigorous causality between interventions and impacts. But this is challenging for a concept like empowerment, which is not only multi-dimensional but also multi-directional. To understand how women's participation in collective action is causally linked to empowerment, it is necessary to separate the outcomes of their participation from the variables influencing their choice to participate.

For now, the evidence from Oxfam's research on women's collective action suggests that those designing interventions in support of women's economic empowerment should not assume that economic benefits from women's participation in groups will automatically translate into broad empowerment outcomes, nor that increased agency over economic resources or decision-making in one domain necessarily translates into another domain.

Where collectives focus narrowly on economic outcomes, a minority of women's group members is likely to experience economic empowerment, and this may be both limited in scope and transitory. Where collective organising is designed to be inclusive of different categories of women, and interventions also tackle gender discriminatory norms and rules that govern women's economic opportunities (e.g. property rights or women's role as carers), greater empowerment impacts may be expected. For lasting empowerment, development actors must go beyond increasing the resources at women's immediate disposal to address unequal social relations and the 'structures of opportunity' faced by women, including their sense of collective as well as individual agency.

End notes

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² The wider findings of the Oxfam Women's Collective Action study are synthesized in FAC policy brief no. 64 (Baden 2014).

³ This section draws on a presentation prepared by Marcella Vigneri for IFPRI's WEAI learning event, held in Washington on 21 November 2013.

⁴ Some elements of the WEAI were not used for the Oxfam study, for example the Gender Parity Sub-Index, which compares the gap in empowerment between men and women in the same household. The Oxfam research was focused on comparing women inside and outside formal groups, so only elements of the five domains of empowerment (SDE) sub-index were adapted for this study. Neither did Oxfam aggregate the different indicators used into a single index, since for our research purposes it was more important to understand the different dimensions of empowerment than to have a single metric for comparison. At the time of the Oxfam field research (early 2012) the WEAI methodology was still being finalised, so adjustments were necessarily exploratory.

⁵ Alkire et al (2012: 57) also note some challenges in the implementation of this part of the WEAI survey during their pilot.

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