## Sengamala Thayaar Educational Trust Women’s College

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**COMMUNITY NUTRITION**

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# COMMUNITY NUTRITION

# INTRODUCTION

Research on the relationship between women’s empowerment and nutrition, particularly child nutrition, is continually expanding. As part of the quest to achieve gender equality, women’s empowerment has increasingly been the focus of many development interventions. In addition to being an end goal in itself, women’s empowerment is also considered as a means by which to achieve other important development outcomes, such as improvements in child nutritional status. As women are often the primary caretakers in a household, intrahousehold dynamics that determine allocation of resources and their impact on individuals’ well-being are increasingly a subject of analysis.

Substantial evidence now shows that households do not necessarily act in a unitary manner when allocating resources; women and men often have different preferences for allocating food and nonfood resources and may therefore distribute these resources differently, based on their bargaining power within a household (Alderman et al. 1995; Hoddinott and Haddad 1995; Quisumbing and Maluccio 2003; Quisumbing 2003). Research also shows positive associations between increases in women’s empowerment and improved nutrition outcomes and, conversely, that actions leading to women’s *disempowerment* can result in adverse nutritional impacts for women themselves as well as for their children (Bhagowalia et al. 2012; Quisumbing and Maluccio 2003; Smith and Haddad 2000; Smith et al. 2003a). Investing in women is therefore considered beneficial for improving human capital formation, especially in terms of child nutrition, health, and education (Quisumbing 2003; Smith et al. 2003a; World Bank 2001; Yoong, Rabinovich, and Diepeveen 2012).

In light of this, many interventions that aim to alleviate poverty and improve investments in human capital consider women’s empowerment as a key pathway by which to achieve impact, and these interventions often target women as their main beneficiaries. But while evaluations of these programs may examine their impact on human capital outcomes such as nutritional status, their impact on women’s empowerment is not always rigorously measured and at times merely assumed. This paper reviews (1) evidence of links between women’s empowerment and nutrition outcomes, while keeping in mind that women are by no means a homogenous group, and (2) evidence of the impact of different programs on women’s empowerment, nutrition, or both.

The paper continues with an explanation of the methodology, followed by a reflection on the concept of women’s empowerment and a review of evidence on the linkages between women’s empowerment and nutrition. Next, we examine some of the broad-based structural interventions intended to influence underlying gender norms in society and to eradicate gender discrimination (such as education, political representation, and various legal reforms), as well as direct interventions that often target women as the primary beneficiaries, focusing on cash transfer (CT) programs, agricultural interventions, and microfinance programs. The paper ends with a discussion of the findings, remaining evidence gaps, and outlines recommendations for future research, with the aim of ultimately contributing to the broader question of how women’s empowerment interventions can be made more nutrition sensitive.

# UNDERSTANDING AND MEASURING WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

Over the past two decades, discourse and attention to the concept of *empowerment* has steadily increased within international development discourse. Women’s empowerment is deemed particularly important as an end in itself from a social justice and equality perspective as well as a necessary means to achieve development goals such as poverty reduction and investments in human capital such as nutrition, health, and education. In relation to agriculture and nutrition, women’s empowerment has been championed from both of these perspectives; “closing the gender gap”1 in agriculture (for example, in land, livestock, education, financial and extension services, labor, and technology) is expected to lead to significant gains in agricultural productivity, self-esteem, income growth, and improved child health and nutrition (Quisumbing et al., n.d.; Smith et al. 2003a). Research shows that women—as mothers and primary caretakers—are more likely to influence health and nutrition outcomes of their children and their families as a whole; hence, women’s empowerment has become core to the design, implementation, and evaluation of policy and programmatic interventions (FAO 2011; Quisumbing 2003; Quisumbing et al., n.d.; Smith et al. 2003a).

However, despite the evidence supporting the hypothesis that women are more likely to allocate resources toward public goods, especially those benefiting children, scholars have also expressed caution about using the economic models that have come to these conclusions. They point out that higher- spending outcomes on child goods could also result in a decrease in expenditure on other important public goods (that may also benefit children) or a reduction in overall household spending on public goods, or that certain methods of female empowerment may have opposite effects (for example, reducing gender discrimination could lead to women’s preferences gravitating toward those of men, which might result in reduced spending on children). They hence point to the need for more empirical evidence to determine the empowerment effects of the various economic models that can be used to demonstrate effects of targeting women and the causal link between female empowerment and (economic) development (Doepke and Tertilt 2011). Furthermore, the variation in the interpretation of women’s empowerment continues to pose challenges to the ways in which interventions are conceptualized, implemented, and measured, and what (intended and unintended) impacts these interventions ultimately have.

## Defining Empowerment

The debate on the meaning and measurement of empowerment has been captured by several detailed reviews and papers.2 Depending on context and author, empowerment has been associated with a wide range of definitions.3 The terms that most often overlap across various definitions refer to choice, power, options, control, and *agency*.4 With regard to women’s empowerment specifically, they most often refer to “women’s ability to make decisions and affect outcomes of importance to themselves and their families. Control over one’s life and over resources is often stressed” (Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender 2002, 5).

In an attempt to bridge similarities across definitions, Kabeer provides a useful conceptualization of empowerment: “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Kabeer 1999a, 437). This understanding of empowerment emphasizes two important elements: first, it highlights that empowerment is a *process* that involves change from a condition of disempowerment and denial of choice to one of empowerment. Second, it emphasizes agency, meaning that “women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change that is being described or measured” (Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender 2002, 7).5 Following this interpretation, agency—the “ability to define one’s goals and act upon them” (Kabeer 1999a, 438)— involves not only decisionmaking and choice but also resistance, bargaining and negotiation, and reflection.6 Agency, and the expansion thereof, is therefore often considered a “defining criterion” of empowerment, although its importance and measurement may vary according to different activities or “domains of life” (Ibrahim and Alkire 2007; Kabeer 1999a; Malhotra and Mather 1997; Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender 2002).7

Hence, while definitions of empowerment vary, detailed reviews of the concept demonstrate that it is most often described as a process and as the expansion of agency. Although empowerment appears frequently in the development literature, welcomed as a solution to achieve development challenges, the way in which it is context specific, amorphous, and political must also be acknowledged so that it can be genuinely realized. Who is empowered and what this means to them of course varies significantly. The pathways through which women are empowered and the way in which this will impact nutrition is also highly contextual and will be explored in later sections of this paper.

## “Empowerment-lite”

The literature questioning interpretations of empowerment in the development context has also expanded in the recent past. Several scholars caution against replacing what started as explicitly feminist goals for rights and social justice with technocratic discourses on poverty reduction, governance, efficiency, and welfare (Batliwala 1993, 1994; Cornwall and Anyidoho 2010; Cornwall and Edwards 2010; Cornwall, Gideon, and Wilson 2008; Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007; Kabeer 1999a, 2005a; Molyneux 2006; Mukhopadhyay 1997)—a phenomenon that Cornwall (2007) has termed “empowerment-lite.” Mukhopadhyay, for example, argues that “the concerns of feminists . . . with the political project of equality are being normalized in the development business as an ahistorical, apolitical, de-contextualised and technical project that leaves the prevailing and unequal power relations intact” (Mukhopadhyay 1997,

justice and as a valued goal in itself has had to take second place to the demonstration of its synergy with official development goals” (Kabeer 1999b, 42), only integrating it in ways that are useful for development organizations to attain development priorities (Mukhopadhyay 1997). These challenges have even been acknowledged by major development actors. A preliminary review of the evidence on empowerment and accountability carried out by the Department for International Development asserted that “empowerment cannot be bestowed by donor or government interventions . . . [as] citizens often [engage] outside officially prescribed channels” (DFID 2011, 2) rather than through pre-prescribed pathways that start with choices that are assumed to have causal relationships with particular actions and outcomes.

## Measuring Women’s Empowerment

Measurement and operationalization of empowerment has also varied widely. Because processes of empowerment and exercise of agency cannot be easily observed, proxy indicators are often used for measurement. The challenge that comes with using proxy measures is that they do not provide much information on the “decisionmaking dynamics or mechanisms of impact” (Quisumbing 2003, 197). Where causality is often ambiguous, these measures are therefore better defined as correlates or indirect measures of empowerment rather than determinants (Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender 2002). However, where causality is clear, they may be defined as determinants or direct measures of empowerment (Samman and Santos 2009). The main correlates or indirect measures of empowerment most frequently cited in the literature (with some overlap) include the following:

* education (for example, female literacy, female enrollment in secondary school, maternal education)
* labor market status (for example, childcare options, labor laws, female labor force participation, gender wage differentials, women’s share of earned income)
* legal frameworks (for example, property rights law, marriage and family law, inheritance law, labor laws)
* marriage and kinship (for example, whether marriage is endogamous or exogamous, virilocal or uxorilocal,8 age difference between spouses, family structure, number of children, rates of female versus male migration)
* land ownership (for example, proportion of women who own land according to legal or customary tenure systems, control over income generated from land, legal reform on inheritance laws)
* social norms (for example, women’s physical mobility)
* political representation (for example, proportion of seats in parliament held by women)9 While these correlates are important indicators in and of themselves that may facilitate

empowerment, they do not necessarily directly—or automatically—translate into empowerment. To

overcome various challenges inherent in the use of proxy measures, attempts to use direct measures of empowerment have increased. The majority of this research has focused on the individual and household levels, and primarily on household decisionmaking processes and access to and control over resources.

Individual and household-level indicators often used to directly measure empowerment relate to the following:

* Women’s involvement in household decisionmaking (economic decisions related to finances, expenditures, spending, resource allocation; social and domestic matters regarding marriage; and child-related decisions such as schooling, health, and nutrition)
* Women’s access to or control over resources (for example, access to or control over cash, assets, household income, unearned income, participation in paid employment)
* Women’s freedom of movement or mobility
* Power relations between husband and wife
* Women’s and men’s attitudes toward abuse and intimate partner violence, and attitudes toward gender roles
* Sources of power such as media exposure, education, or paid employment10 Other, perhaps less commonly used, indicators include the following:
* Management and knowledge (for example, farm management, accounting knowledge, managerial control of loan)
* Marriage, kin, and social support (for example, social status of family of origin, assets brought to marriage, traditional support networks, educational differences between husband and wife, relative age at first marriage [Smith and Haddad 2000], widowhood and remarriage [Van de Walle 2011])
* Settings of power such as social hierarchies (Bhagowalia et al. 2012), or indicators such as appreciation in the household, and sense of self-worth (Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender 2002)

Studies that measure women’s empowerment have used the above measures to various extents and in various combinations. The above list merely attempts to provide an indication as to what types of measures have been used in recent research. These measures will have more or less relevance, depending on the level at and dimensions along which women’s empowerment can occur. Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender (2002) lay out the various dimensions along which women can be empowered (economic, sociocultural, familial and interpersonal, legal, political, and psychological) and also the different levels at which empowerment can occur: the household and community, as well as national, regional, and global. In this conceptualization, individual- and household-level indicators are more related to direct measures than those at the aggregate level, such as national and regional, which are more related to indirect measures.

Because women’s empowerment is highly context specific and multidimensional, it is important that any correlates or determinants used are measured by indicators that represent a balance between universal indicators of empowerment that correspond with internationally agreed-upon indicators on gender equality and rights, and context-specific locally defined indicators that are in line with respective sociocultural interpretations of empowerment.

# WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT AND NUTRITION

Women’s empowerment is considered crucial for improving nutrition outcomes. Since women are often primary caregivers, they can influence their children’s nutrition indirectly through their own nutritional status as well as directly through childcare practices (Bhagowalia et al. 2012; Smith et al. 2003a). Several studies (using direct and indirect measures of female empowerment) have demonstrated the important associations between women’s empowerment dimensions and their own nutrition as well as that of their children.11 For example, in Pakistan, women’s intrahousehold status (measured by age at first marriage, percentage age difference between woman and spouse, difference between woman’s and spouse’s years of education, woman’s income, and unearned income from remittances) was positively associated with food security among their children (Guha-Khasnobis and Hazarika 2006). In Bangladesh, greater empowerment of women (measured by attitudes toward abuse, decisionmaking power, and mobility) and maternal endowments such as education and height were associated with greater dietary diversity scores and reduced child stunting (Bhagowalia et al. 2012). A study in Andhra Pradesh, India, found that measures of maternal autonomy (such as financial autonomy, participation in decisionmaking within the household, acceptance of domestic violence, and freedom of movement) were associated with positive infant feeding and growth outcomes (Shroff et al. 2011). A recent study in India found that maternal autonomy (measured based on variables that indicate a woman’s freedom and ability to think, speak, decide, and act independently) was positively associated with child nutritional status, albeit only for children under three years of age (Arulampalam, Bhaskar, and Srivastava 2012). In Ethiopia, a study that analyzed correlates of female empowerment found positive effects of female bargaining power on child nutrition and child education (Fafchamps, Kebede, and Quisumbing 2009).12

A recent impact evaluation of a project by CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere) in Bangladesh using a rights-based livelihoods approach to address malnutrition found that its women’s empowerment interventions had a “strong independent impact on stunting, and the sanitation, women’s empowerment, and one poverty alleviation intervention were found to have synergistic impacts with direct nutrition interventions” (Smith et al. 2011, 33). Women’s empowerment was measured by a score for women’s involvement in major decisions,13 percent of school-aged children attending school, percent of literate adults, and percent of women earning cash income. In South Asia, Africa south of the Sahara (SSA), and Latin America and the Caribbean, women’s social status in the household and community were also found to have a positive impact on the nutritional status of children (Smith et al.

2003a), and cross-country studies have demonstrated that improvements in women’s education were responsible for almost 43 percent of the total reduction in children underweight between 1970 and 1995 (Smith and Haddad 2000).

On the other hand, women who are *not* empowered are more likely to have more time constraints, lower mental health, less control over household resources, lower self-esteem, and less access to information about health services (Bhagowalia et al. 2012). The evidence of the impact of domestic violence against women—an indicator of ultimate disempowerment—on nutrition continues to develop.14 In Liberia (Sobkoviak, Yount, and Halim 2012) and Bangladesh (Bhagowalia et al. 2012; Ziaei, Naved, and Ekström 2012), studies showed an association between experience or acceptance of physical domestic

## Figure 4.1—Conceptual framework depicting causes of malnutrition and links between women’s empowerment and nutrition

Source: Adapted from Smith et al. 2003a and UNICEF 1990.

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# KEY INTERVENTIONS THAT AIM TO EMPOWER WOMEN

Gender equality and women’s empowerment—recognized as one of the Millennium Development Goals—have been presented as critical goals in their own right, as well as potential drivers of poverty reduction. Smith et al. (2003a) conceptualize improving women’s status16 in two ways: (1) by eradicating discrimination based on gender to create a “level playing field for women and men” such as ensuring equality in access to human and physical capital and political participation, and (2) by proactively promoting catch-up in women’s status by implementing programs that specifically aim to empower women. Section 5 is divided into two main subsections: the first briefly discusses eradicating gender discrimination as a structural foundation for the second, which reviews three specific interventions.

## Structural Interventions That Aim to Eradicate Gender Discrimination

Public policy can take many different approaches in aiming to eradicate gender discrimination and ensure that women have the same economic, social, cultural, political, and civil rights protected and realized as men do. Structural interventions that help to reduce gender gaps in political voice and participation and in access to public services, productive assets, and resources form an important foundation for eliminating gender discrimination and serve as a basis for programs specifically aimed at empowering women.17

Ensuring that country constitutions and legislation clearly renounce any form of gender discrimination and assert equality between men and women before the law are critical first steps (King, Klasen, and Porter 2007; Smith et al. 2003b). Related to this, improving women’s representation and participation in politics is critical18; in addition to voting rights and the right to basic citizenship documents like birth certificates (King, Klasen, and Porter 2007), women have the right to be as equally represented as men in political decisionmaking forums, and evidence indicates that the representation of women in politics is related to significant changes in policymaking (Beaman et al. 2010). Men and women often have different political and policy preferences, meaning that in political systems where women are underrepresented, policymaking could be partial to male policy interests (Beaman et al.

2010, 1). Quota systems have, hence, been introduced in many countries as a way to enhance as well as measure women’s political participation.19 These systems have led to significant changes in women’s participation in politics. India’s Gram Panchayat system is an example of a quota system implemented at the subnational level, where increased representation of women has led to changes in the way in which public goods are provided, such as increased investment in drinking water and roads (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004). Further evidence from India (Bhalotra and Clots-Figueras 2011) as well as the United States

In addition to enhancing women’s political participation and voice, ensuring equal access to public services that build human, physical, and financial capital is important. Women and men, and boys and girls, should have equal access to the same quantity and quality of education and healthcare, including health information and reproductive healthcare services and family planning.21 In relation to food and nutrition security, women should have the same access as men to agricultural information and extension services and should be able to cultivate their land with crops they deem most important for their family’s health and food and nutrition security (Smith et al. 2003b). They should also have equitable access to a healthy and hygienic environment, including access to safe water and sanitation.

Equal access to financial assets (such as credit) and physical assets (such as land) is important to improve women’s intrahousehold bargaining power in relation to these assets and their control over the income generated from them.22 Legal reforms in relation to marriage and family law, inheritance law, and property rights are important in ensuring this access. Marital property regimes determine how property that is attained before, during, and after marriage is treated, which is particularly important for women’s rights to property after a marriage dissolves.23 In case of divorce, the ability to persist should be equal for men and women. In Ontario, Canada, for example, legislation that improved women’s rights to assets after divorce was found to be related to reductions in female suicide rates among (married) older women, although rates were unaffected among younger (unmarried) women (Adam, Hoddinott, and Ligon 2011). In Ethiopia, the Revised Family Code (2000) no longer allowed husbands to deny their wives the ability to work outside the home, raised the minimum age of marriage for women, and required the consent of both spouses in marital property administration. It, hence, required “equal rights to spouses during conclusion, duration, and dissolution of marriage. It also required equal division of all assets between the husband and wife upon divorce,” even though the adoption of the law has not been uniform across all the regions (Kumar and Quisumbing 2012, 2). Studies on the impact of this law show that the perceptions about the division of assets upon divorce shifted to an equal division between wife and husband after the code’s passing (Kumar and Quisumbing 2012) and that in places where the code was ratified, women were more likely to work in full-time and (higher) paid jobs and to work in occupations that required work outside of the home (Hallward-Driemeier and Gajigo 2011).

Reforming inheritance law can ensure that girls have equal inheritance rights as boys. For example, in India, national inheritance legislation was modified to eradicate gender discrimination (the Hindu Succession Act); in two states it was found that this had a positive and significant impact on the likelihood that daughters would inherit land, even though inequality in landholdings persisted between

Reforming labor laws in both the public and private sectors so that they do not discriminate against women on the basis of their sex or pregnancy status can help reduce the gender gap in labor force participation and wages. Social protection programs, such as child support, maternity benefits, and pensions, are important to ensure that women have equal access to formal-sector jobs with the appropriate social security and retirement benefits (King, Klasen, and Porter 2007; Smith et al. 2003b).

Improving women’s access to different assets through these types of public policy interventions contributes to leveling the playing field between women and men and to building the endowments of women and girls (such as their education, health and nutrition, and employability), which, in turn, can lead to significant improvements in their own well-being and that of their children.24

## Interventions That Aim to Empower Women Directly

To make progress toward the Millennium Development Goals, development interventions increasingly focus on women’s empowerment. This paper discusses three such types of interventions that aim to empower women directly: CT programs, agricultural interventions, and microfinance programs. These three types of interventions have typically either targeted women as their primary beneficiaries or have included women’s empowerment among their key objectives. What follows is a review of the evidence from these three types of development programs and the extent to which they measure their impact on women’s empowerment, nutrition, or a combination of the two.