



Policy Brief

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Overview

Women's empowerment is important in its own right, yet it is also a catalyst towards other development goals. Many important dimensions of empowerment have to be considered, including – but not limited to – economic empowerment through employment, decision-making power over income and credit and ownership rights; decision-making and representation in the community and society and an equitable workload.

This brief demonstrates that methodologies and measurement tools are being developed based on individual and household surveys, which are particularly useful to monitor the evolution of women's position in the household, the family and the community. Drawing from (a subset of) questions from existing surveys, which have been tested in various contexts, may be helpful to construct indicators that capture some of the more important domains of empowerment.

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Measuring Women's Empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa

DESPITE THE FACT THAT WOMEN COMPRISE HALF THE WORLD'S population, gender inequality persists worldwide, especially in low- and middle-income countries (UNDP, 2016). This inequality is found in many forms: an unequal distribution of income and control over resources (including assets and financial capital) between women and men, an unequal distribution of household duties (with women being responsible as care-givers), as well as gender-based violence and constraints imposed on women's socio-economic mobility due to legal or cultural barriers.

Achieving gender equality is important in its own right, but it is also a strong catalyst to other development outcomes such as poverty reduction, well-being and health. This is because gender inequality often prevents women from benefitting from development interventions in the same way as men. For instance, women may lack the resources, time or freedom of movement to travel long distances to access health, legal or social services, either because of the gendered nature of roles within the household or because they are intentionally restricted by their partners, families or society (Smee and Woodroffe, 2013). As such, employment interventions may have little impact for women if their household responsibilities limit them to part-time, low-paid work conducted at home.

It is therefore important that development practitioners gender-mainstream the design and implementation of their interventions, to gain insight into who participates and benefits most from the intervention. But it is equally important to evaluate the impact of development interventions on women's empowerment. Women's empowerment is defined as women's enhanced control over decisions that affect their own lives, including access to and control over productive resources, strengthened participation in public decision-making processes and enhanced well-being through improved access to infrastructure and services. To track empowerment over time and as a result of development interventions, multifaceted measurement tools are needed to capture the various dimensions of empowerment.



In this brief, we illustrate a multidimensional empowerment instrument that can be used for such a purpose. It was developed as part of a study funded by the International Labour Organization and the International Fund for Agricultural Development, carried out by UNU-MERIT in collaboration with the University of Tunis and the University of Passau in Germany – a study entitled ‘Measuring Women and Youth Empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa region’. Various indices¹ reveal particularly striking gender inequality figures in countries across the MENA region – so a new tool for monitoring the position of women is particularly relevant. We therefore applied the methodology to a nationally representative survey conducted in Tunisia to test the methodology and to map levels of empowerment of men and women. We present the findings below and discuss some policy implications.

Measuring women’s empowerment: methodology

To measure women’s empowerment levels, we build on the existing ‘Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEA-Index),’

which was originally developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute, the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative and USAID, to track changes in women’s empowerment levels that resulted from interventions under the ‘Feed The Future’ Initiative. The WEA-Index is a composite index reflecting to what extent women in the agricultural sector can take control over critical parts of their lives in the household, community and economy (Alkire et al., 2013).

The WEA index is based on sub-indices reflecting five domains of empowerment: production, resources, income, leadership and time use. The sub-indices are interesting in their own right to identify domains where action is needed to increase women’s decision-making power and autonomy (Alkire et al., 2013). The WEA methodology is based on surveys among men and women of the same household and documents the extent to which women are disempowered, in absolute terms, and relative to their men.

Table 1. The domain indicators for empowerment used in Tunisia.

Five Domains of Empowerment (5DE)	Indicators	Weight	Policy issues that are generally triggered	
Production	1. Input in productive decisions	1/5	Economic empowerment	
	2. Ownership of assets	1/10		
Resources	3. Access to and decisions on credit	1/10		
	4. Control over use of income	1/5		
Income	5. Group membership	1/10		Decision-making and representation
	6. Speaking in public	1/10		
Leadership	7. Workload	1/10		Equitable workload balance
	8. Leisure	1/10		



The WEA methodology is designed to survey mainly populations in rural areas and has been applied in Bangladesh (Sraboni et al., 2013), Guatemala (Peterman et al., 2012a) and Uganda (Peterman et al., 2012b). However, in the MENA region, an increasingly large share of the population is living in urban areas where issues and concerns about women's empowerment are equally present. We therefore adapted the survey instrument (questionnaire) to the context of the MENA region and operationalised the indicators accordingly – thus making the methodology applicable to both rural and urban populations.

As in the original WEA-Index (Alkire et al., 2013), we measure both absolute and relative levels of empowerment for women. We measure absolute levels of women's empowerment across five domains (production, resources, income, leadership and time use). Each domain receives the same weight (1/5) and we have one or two indicators per domain (thus, in case of two indicators, each indicator receives a weight of 1/10). Table 1 describes the five domains and their respective indicators. The indicators are based on survey questions (see examples in textbox) and for each indicator we determine cut-off points for whether we consider a person to be empowered, or not.

A woman is considered 'empowered' in absolute terms if she has an absolute empowerment score of at least 80% based on the weighted indicators, which corresponds to being empowered in four out of five domains; otherwise, she is considered 'not empowered'. To compute a woman's relative empowerment, the absolute empowerment score of a woman is compared to that of the primary male in the household – generally the husband. If the woman's empowerment score equals or exceeds that of the husband, there is gender parity, or

she is relatively empowered.² A 'Gender Parity Index' reflects the proportion of women in the sample being empowered in relative terms.

Women's empowerment in Tunisia

Although gender equality is in the constitution and Tunisia is one of the few Arab countries to have recently implemented significant changes in the constitutional, legislative and policy framework to promote gender equality and eliminate gender-based discrimination, in practice large inequalities still exist. In addition, Tunisia faces substantial political and economic challenges, which affect women and youth in particular. For instance, the unemployment rate amounts to 46% for young women. Despite the fact that (especially young) women in Tunisia enjoy high education levels which are for the youngest cohorts as high as those by men, strong and persistent traditional norms result in low female labour market participation rates, of about only 26% (ILO, 2017). The challenge of finding decent work and the persistence of traditional norms contributes to low economic empowerment rates for Tunisia's youth – and for young women in particular.

To test our methodology, we carried out a nationally representative household survey in Tunisia in September and November of 2017. We collected data from 1,150 households and 2,511 individuals of which 1,320 were females. In addition to collecting information on the variables necessary to calculate the women's empowerment index in Tunisia we included modules on labour participation, (un)employment, migration, social media use, psychological well-being, attitudes towards domestic violence and support for violent extremism.

A first striking finding is that 95% of all women that live in households with another male primary decision-maker are not empowered in

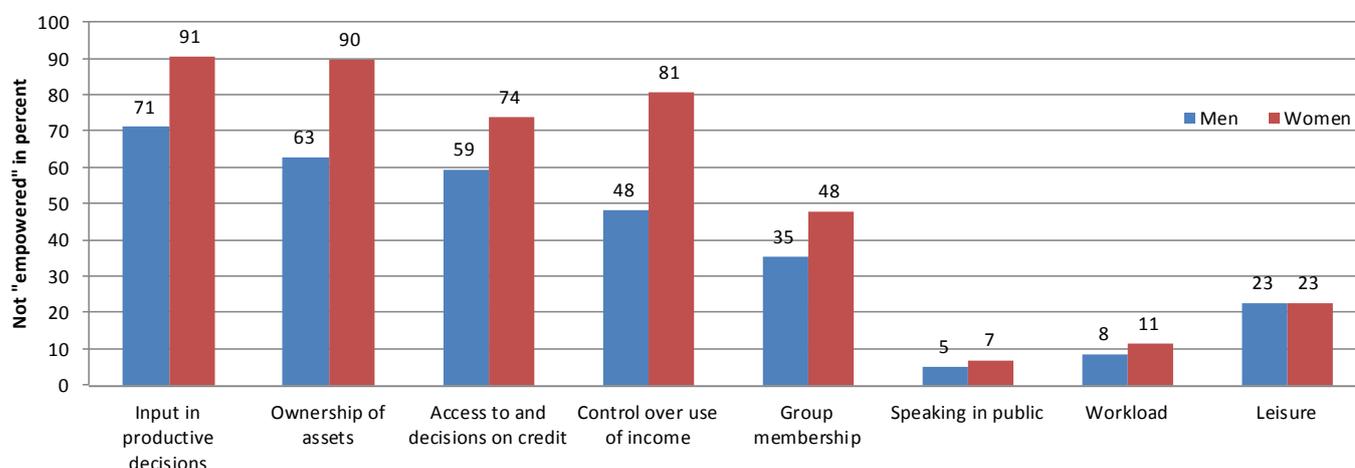
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absolute terms, i.e. they do not have adequate achievements in at least four of the five domains of empowerment or in a combination of the weighted indicators that make up at least 80% of the total. We also find a relatively large percentage of men to be disempowered (74%). To shed light on the domains where men and women are more disempowered, Figure 1 shows the percentage of disempowered men and women, per indicator of the index.

By contrast empowerment within the domains of leadership and time use is much higher. Gender parity within the household is reached in 35% of the households. We do not find much difference between urban and rural households in terms of overall levels of empowerment and gender parity, but the drivers are slightly different. Input in productive decisions, asset ownership and access to and decisions on credit contribute more to empowerment in rural areas than in urban areas - yet the reverse



This result is driven by low levels of economic empowerment, meaning low levels of inputs into productive decisions, limited control over resources like assets and credit, and little say about how income is being spent. Because a large share of both men and women in the sample were inactive, without engagement in productive activity, the percentages disempowered are large in both categories. And when job opportunities are scarce, persistent gender stereotypes and social norms ensure that jobs are first given to men – hence the position of women is comparably worse. Asset poverty and restricted access to credit are apparent for both men and women, but more obvious among women.

applies to control over the use of income, group membership, speaking in public and leisure. Urban areas may provide more facilities for group membership related to sports, cultural activities or civil society and are more likely to have a diverse population living in non-traditional households.

We also investigated in greater detail the empowerment levels of youth. In the households we surveyed, we also interviewed up to two young persons (18-30) living with their parents, and asked them questions tailored to the world of young people, such as whether they have a job or are in study or training, who decides about their education or employment, their interaction with friends and use of social media.³ This gave insights into how empowerment evolves at a younger age. Focusing on the activity status, for instance, of

young people still living in their parents' house, 61% of men and 52% of women have a job or study, a gender gap of 'only' 9 percentage points. But among the young adults who have married or settled independently, 78% of men are active, a vast improvement, against only 19% of women, a serious drop, resulting in a 59 percentage point gender differential. The transition from the parental household into a new household, often after marriage, clearly requires many women to quit the labour force and to engage in household work. Household chores are still widely seen as a woman's responsibility. This points to the existence of conservative gender roles that are induced through marriage, even among young couples. These gender norms and attitudes have a tremendous effect on the success of employment interventions for women.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Women's empowerment is important in its own right, yet it is also a catalyst towards other development goals. Many important dimensions of empowerment have to be considered, including – but not limited to – economic empowerment through employment, decision-making power over income and credit and ownership rights; decision-making and representation in the community and society and an equitable workload. The extent to which women are empowered can influence the success of a proposed intervention, e.g. through higher participation.

In turn, interventions can affect empowerment directly, but can also affect different dimensions in opposite ways. For example, an employment intervention can empower women economically, but if the burden of household work remains with the women, it may result in excessive workload or a simply unmanageable work/life balance.

The fact that traditional norms are strong and persistent points to a need to encourage early on equal participation in training, business opportunities and finance that may help change female labour market participation in the long run as well as the social norms associated with it. All actors (NGOs, civil society, media, international organisations) should be aware of the discrepancy between what the laws say and what is practised on the ground – and so hold policymakers and national government accountable for commitments.

It is therefore also important to understand the socio-cultural context of interventions and to gender mainstream interventions by design, investigating the question of whether women are likely to benefit from an intervention and why, or why not. In the implementation stage one should monitor whether women benefit effectively by using gender-disaggregated indicators of uptake, participation and main outcome. A more rigorous impact assessment of interventions should take into account the effect on women's empowerment by looking at changes over time in the various dimensions of empowerment. Even if gender parity or women's empowerment is not a core objective of a planned action and not the primary outcome of interest, it may still be insightful to follow up on trends in women's empowerment as secondary outcomes.

This brief has demonstrated that methodologies and measurement tools are being developed based on individual and household surveys, which are particularly useful to monitor the evolution of women's position in the household, the family and the community. Drawing from (a subset of) questions from existing surveys, which have been tested in various contexts, may be helpful to construct indicators that capture some of the more important domains of empowerment.

Notes

1. UNDP's Gender Inequality Index, Social Watch's Gender Equity Index, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Women's Economic Opportunity Index all consistently show the MENA region to be performing worse than any other region in the world (UNDP, 2016; Social Watch, 2012; World Economic Forum, 2017; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012).

2. For more details on the survey questions, see Ghali et al. (2017) *Women's and Youth Empowerment in Rural Tunisia - An assessment using the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)*: <https://bit.ly/2UQhpMo>

3. For more details on the methodology, see the ILO report at: <https://bit.ly/2UQhpMo>



Example survey questions

Input in productive decisions

Did you engage in agricultural activity (lifestock raising, fishing)/non-agricultural activity/paid employment in the last 12 months? If yes, to what extent do you participate in decision regarding this activity?

Ownership of assets

Do you own, alone or with spouse: land; buildings; a business; a motorised vehicle; a computer; a mobile phone?

Access to and decisions on credit

Who takes the decision to take a (formal or informal) loan? Who decides how to spend the borrowed money?

Control over use of income

Do you have a bank or postal account? Who decides about the use of the money on this account?

Who decides how to spend income earned from: agricultural activity (lifestock raising; fishing); non-agricultural activity; paid employment?

Group membership

Are you an active member in a community or youth association, cultural or religious association, sports club or political party?

Speaking in public

Are you free to speak up in public? To be a candidate for a political or social position?

Workload

How many hours a day do you spend on work, including household duties and taking care of children and family members?

Leisure

How satisfied are you with the time available for leisure?



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The United Nations University – Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (UNU-MERIT) is a research and training institute of United Nations University based in Maastricht in the south of the Netherlands. The institute, which collaborates closely with Maastricht University, carries out research and training on a range of social, political and economic factors that drive economic development in a global perspective. Overall the institute functions as a unique research centre and graduate school for around 100 PhD fellows and 140 Master's students. It is also a UN think tank addressing a broad range of policy questions on science, innovation and democratic governance.

INSIDE:

Policy Brief

Measuring Women's Empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa

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