



# POLICY BRIEF



## The Challenges of Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment: Evidence from the GrOW Program.

Programs and policies aimed at improving women's well-being globally will benefit from careful attention to defining and measuring women's economic empowerment, and need to balance the trade-off between instrument specificity and generalizability.

### WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Development objectives increasingly aim to improve women's well-being globally. The contemporary emphasis placed on women's empowerment is both conspicuous and explicit in the international dialogue around development (as evidenced by the United Nation's focus on women in the Sustainable Development Goals) and among Development Assistance Committee countries' foreign policies (as evidenced by Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy). This emphasis has translated into development programming targeting women in the Global South, and especially with the ultimate goal of increasing their economic empowerment.

### KEY RESULTS

- There is tremendous heterogeneity in approaches to measuring women's economic empowerment across the fourteen GrOW projects.
- GrOW teams use a combination of direct and indirect measures to capture women's economic empowerment.
- GrOW researchers consider a range of issues when selecting the measures of women's economic empowerment that they use.

While this focus on women and women's economic empowerment (WEE) has been well-intentioned to correct gender imbalances, especially in developing countries, the effectiveness of this programming and WEE policies more generally is still a matter of considerable debate.

One challenge in establishing whether such policies are effective in improving women's empowerment and well-being is how to measure such complex concepts. Indeed, there are almost as many different instruments used to measure WEE as there are research papers or development projects that utilize them. Yet finding some consensus on the concept and measurement of WEE is important for designing and evaluating programs and policies aimed at improving women's well-being.

To better understand existing approaches for measuring WEE, McGill University researchers Sonia Laszlo and Kate Grantham conducted a review of the different measures of WEE used in the international [Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women \(GrOW\) program](#). The GrOW program, is a five-year, multi-funder partnership between the UK Government's Department for International Development, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). With 14 projects in 50 countries, GrOW works with researchers to improve economic outcomes and opportunities for poor women on the themes of employment, the care economy, and women's economic agency.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

The research was conducted by way of a "mapping exercise," a careful review of all GrOW project research papers and proposals submitted to the authors by IDRC as of summer 2017. In total, this included 32 documents for GrOW's 14 projects. A separate exercise and working paper by the authors conducts a systematic and multidisciplinary review of the recent literature which extends beyond the GrOW program and provides a conceptual framework for measuring WEE (see Laszlo et al., 2017).

A resulting "inventory" of measures was organized according to six main domains of WEE that are identifiable across the GrOW projects: (1) labour market outcomes, (2) control over household resources, (3) marriage and fertility, (4) political participation, (5) child rearing, and (6) access to education and job training. These domains further correspond with those commonly identified in existing scholarship on WEE.

In documenting the measures of WEE used in the GrOW

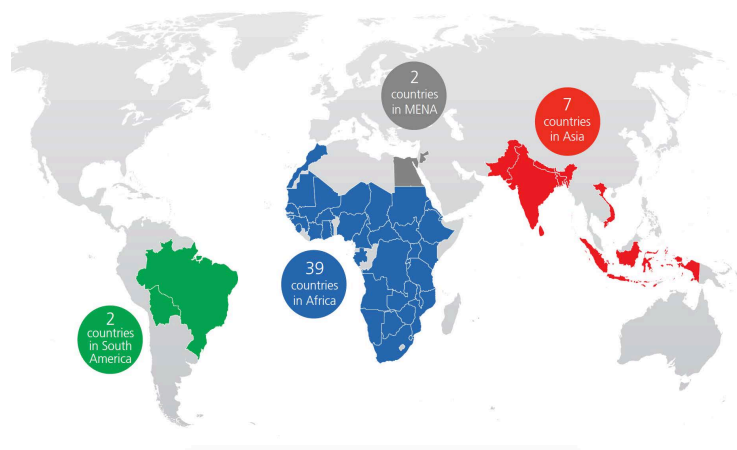


Image: Map of GrOW project locations around the world.

program, the authors distinguish between *direct measures* (measures which are directly related to a woman's ability to assert her preferences in decision-making), *indirect measures* (outcomes of the decision-making process), and *constraint measures* (factors outside of the direct control of the woman and/or her household which constrain her ability to achieve desirable outcomes).

This three-way classification of WEE measures - direct, indirect and constraints - is not far removed from the categorization in Kabeer (1999), who distinguishes between three interconnected dimensions of WEE: resources, agency and achievements. It complements existing classifications of WEE that distinguish between objective (observable by the researcher) and subjective (centered on respondents' beliefs and experiences) measures (e.g. Quisumbing et al, 2016). It is also complementary to the work by Buvinic and Furst-Nichols (2016), who distinguish between different outcome measures of WEE.

## KEY FINDINGS

**There is tremendous heterogeneity in approaches to measuring WEE across the 14 GrOW projects.**

The research identified more than 40 different measures used by GrOW teams to capture WEE. The most frequent measures used by the teams include: women's labor force participation, women's education rates, women's autonomy and household decision making power, gender inequality in social norms, and gender inequality in legal institutions. The large range of measures used is due in large part to the complexity of empowerment as a concept and the lack of consensus in the broader literature on how to study WEE empirically.

### **GrOW teams use a combination of direct and indirect measures to capture WEE.**

The inventory reveals that half of all GrOW projects (n=7) use at least one direct measure of WEE in their research. A full list of these direct measures includes, in order of frequency:

- women's autonomy and household decision making power (e.g. control over household resources);
- gender inequality in social norms (e.g. women's freedom of movement, freedom from violence or harassment in public spaces, son preference);
- gender inequality in legal institutions (e.g. civil liberties, needing permission to work or have bank account, ability to buy or own property);
- attitudes towards violence against women (both men's and women's);
- women's self-efficacy (e.g. self-confidence and positive self-image, ability to act in adverse circumstance; coping and problem solving);
- intrahousehold allocation of labor and responsibility for unpaid care.

Slightly less than half of all GrOW projects (n=6) use at least one indirect measure of WEE in their research. However, in terms of total numbers, more than twice as many indirect measures are used by GrOW researchers when compared with direct measures. This is likely because indirect measures are typically easier for researchers to study and to compare across data sets. Indirect measures regarding women's labor force participation and education rates are by far the most commonly used indirect measures documented by the research, followed by sociodemographic characteristics like marital status, and health measures like women's life expectancy and contraceptive use.

### **GrOW researchers consider a range of issues when selecting the measures of WEE that they use.**

When selecting appropriate measures, researchers must account for context-specific data constraints and trade-offs between specificity and generalizability, among other issues. Some GrOW project teams use existing measures of WEE like Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) indicators of autonomy, or the set of indicators included in the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI). Others opt to develop their own sets of measures to meet the needs of their research question.

## **POLICY INSIGHTS**

The authors leave it to individuals to assess the suitability of WEE measures for their own purpose. However, several insights and recommendations are proposed for researchers and practitioners working in this area:

### **There exists no one-size-fits-all approach for measuring WEE.**

Researchers must consider a range of issues when selecting the measures of WEE that they use, as mentioned above. Some will design their own sets of measures, while others will employ existing international development indices. These approaches all have their benefits and pitfalls, and their effectiveness will depend on the fit between a researchers' conceptualization and empowerment and the measures they employ. Any useful conversation about how best to measure WEE must allow for flexibility toward research questions, context and data availability and interpret their findings in light of any limitations.

### **Avoid using indirect measures (i.e. outcomes of the empowerment process) as a measure of empowerment itself.**

Outcomes are not equivalent to empowerment and should not be used as a measure of such. Consider labour market outcomes, which is a common example. Whether and how much a woman works is largely a factor of labour market dynamics and her own preferences over consumption and leisure. Similarly, she may be over (or under) employed due to frictions in the labour market (perhaps due to child care related time constraints) making her work more (or less) hours than she would like at poor quality and lower paying jobs. If development decision-makers falsely equate empowerment with, following this example, employment status, then a measure of success will confound a number of causal factors and may not be in line with most definitions of empowerment, especially those that place agency and choice at their core.

### **Explicitly link measurement approaches to a conceptual framework.**

There may never be consensus regarding how best to measure WEE and all existing measures are proxies. For this reason, the authors do not advocate the use of certain measures over others. They do, however, encourage



congruence between the measures that researchers use and the theoretical and conceptual constructs they employ. For researchers designing new instruments, it is recommended that the measurement exercise be accompanied with a definition of WEE and a mapping of how their conceptual framework, which may be domain specific, ties into their measurement approach. Providing a working definition of WEE is an important first step toward achieving such congruence.

## More research is needed.

There is still room to improve the measurement of WEE in developing country contexts. The authors believe there is untapped potential to advance the development of instruments for direct measures of WEE, especially on the more normative aspects such as gender norms and psychosocial dimensions. Specifically, psychosocial or behavioral economics methods can help advance this research agenda. In doing so, the authors see it as important to benchmark new methods against those currently in widespread use (e.g. DHS or WEAI instruments). They also believe that these measurement efforts should be concurrent with pushing forward the theoretical relationship between these indicators.

*This brief was authored and designed by S. Laszlo and K. Grantham. It draws on key findings of the working papers, “Measurement of Women’s Economic Empowerment in GrOW Projects: Inventory and User Guide” by Laszlo and Grantham (2017) and “Grappling with the Challenges of Measuring Women’s Economic Empowerment” by Laszlo et al. (2017).*

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