Published in final edited form as:

Dev Pract. 2010 September 1; 20(7): 840–854. doi:10.1080/09614524.2010.508108.

Women's empowerment revisited: a case study from Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article explores the changing dimensions of women's empowerment over time in three Bangladesh villages where one of the authors has been conducting research since 1991. The article discusses theoretical issues related to the measurement of women's empowerment, and describes findings from a recent study in the villages exploring the current salience of indicators developed for a 1992 survey. In the article we discuss the types of social, economic, and political change that affect the measurement of women's empowerment; propose and explain a new set of indicators for the rural Bangladesh setting; and discuss implications for measuring women's empowerment in other settings.

Keywords

Gender and diversity; Methods; South Asia

Introduction

The empowerment of women is often identified as an important aim of international development policies, and many donor agencies now include women's empowerment in their development strategies. Although empowerment is often conceptualised as a process (Cueva Beteta 2006; Kabeer 2001; Malhotra and Schuler 2005), most quantitative studies have been cross-sectional, comparing individual women with others in their communities or societies (Malhotra and Schuler 2005). In the development of indicators it is usually implicitly assumed that higher levels of empowerment represent a change from a pre-existing situation in which women have more limited power, influence, freedom, or autonomy; but such changes have rarely been measured using a common set of indicators. Such studies can be valuable for cross-national comparisons (UNDP 1995; Ibrahim and Alkire 2007) and for documenting change over time, particularly at the macro- or meso- levels, but we would argue that the meanings and salience of empowerment indicators are likely to evolve over time, and that these changes too should be taken into account, both in developing interventions to foster women's empowerment and in documenting empowerment processes.

This article presents findings from a small study in which a set of empowerment indicators developed within a specific socio-cultural context were reassessed to examine the extent of their relevance 15 years after they had been developed. We define women's empowerment as women's acquisition of resources and capacities and the ability to exercise agency in a context of gender inequality. To our knowledge this is the first published study in which a set of empowerment indicators was qualitatively re-validated some years after development, and accordingly updated.

Methods

This study was undertaken as part of a larger project exploring the influence of empowerment in one generation of women, and health and social outcomes in the next generation.

Sites

The research sites are three villages in Faridpur, Magura, and Rangpur districts of Bangladesh, where the authors had been conducting research since 1991. Conducting research over time in a few sites allows one to observe the ways in which evolving opportunities and constraints in a particular setting influence women's resources, capacities, and agency. The changing context is likely to affect both the meaning and measurement of women's empowerment. In the early 1990s, rural women in these villages had few opportunities other than micro credit for income generation. Literacy rates were very low, and women spent most of their time within their homes, with little chance for social or political involvement outside the family, and little contact with formal institutions, programmes, or services other than door-to-door family-planning and primary-health-care (PHC) campaigns.

Since that time, women in the study villages have had contact with a variety of government and non-government programmes and have been influenced by economic trends, as well as popular media, which have provided resources to women and opportunities for them to expand their skills and knowledge. These have included small-scale rural industries; promotion of girls' education and secondary-school stipends for girls; community-based health and family-planning services and promotion of services outside the home; micro credit and training in skills for income generation; and mass communications on topics related to health, population, political participation, and laws and policies aimed at reducing son preference, dowry, early marriage and childbearing, and gender-based discrimination. Labour migration has also brought new ideas and resources to the villages. Comparison of our 2002 survey data with rural statistics from the 1999–2000 Demographic and Health Survey suggests that the villages are not atypical in the context of rural Bangladesh (Bates *et al.* 2004). To be sure, gender inequality is still painfully evident in Bangladesh in domains such as economic participation, governance, legal rights, and marital relations, where violence by husbands against wives is rampant (Bates *et al.* 2004; Naved and Persson 2005). The social changes associated with the resources and opportunities described above should be seen not as resolutions to the problem of gender equality but as steps along the way.

Empowerment indicators

To investigate the face validity of quantitative empowerment measures, we explored whether composite empowerment scores derived from a quantitative survey that we conducted in 2002 in six villages were consistent with the results of a deeper qualitative investigation of the meanings of the characteristics and behaviours reflected in the women's scores. The 2002 survey employed a set of eight empowerment indicators developed in 1991 and used in two previous surveys. Similar indicators have been employed in other studies since 1991, including in the Demographic and Health Surveys (for example, ORC Macro 2001, questions 623, 628, 717–721).

A composite score for each woman was constructed by aggregating scores for eight discrete indicators, which were in turn constructed by combining responses to two or more survey questions (see Schuler *et al.* 1997 for further details). In addition to being based on extensive qualitative research in the socio-cultural context to which they apply (Hashemi and Schuler 1993), the validity of these empowerment indicators is suggested by the fact that all of them were found to be significantly correlated with women's participation in micro-credit programmes (which were widely believed to be empowering women), controlling for socio-

demographic factors; and by the fact that a subset was correlated with women's use of contraception (Hashemi *et al.* 1996; Schuler *et al.* 1997). Here the eight empowerment indicators are divided into two groups, measuring women's capacities and resources vs. their exercise of agency.

Indicators of women's capacities and resources

- *Political and legal awareness*: whether respondents knew the names of their local government representative, a Member of Parliament, and the Prime Minister; and whether they knew what share of property a son vs. a daughter should receive according to law and could explain the significance of registering a marriage.
- *Economic security*: personal ownership of three specific assets that could be used for productive ends: any land, the homestead land, or the house; productive assets such as a sewing machine; and cash savings.

Indicators of women's agency

- *Mobility*: whether the respondents had ever gone to various places (the market, a medical facility, the movies, outside the village) and gone there alone.
- *Making small purchases*: whether without their husband's permission they make certain purchases, including items used in family food preparation (kerosene oil, cooking oil, spices), small items for themselves (hair oil, soap, glass bangles), and ice cream or sweets for their children; and whether the purchases are made at least in part with money that they themselves earned.
- *Making larger purchases*: whether the respondents purchase pots and pans, children's clothing, and saris for themselves, and the family's daily food; and whether any of these are purchased with money that they themselves earned.
- *Involvement in major decisions*: whether they had been involved in the past few years in household decisions (individually or jointly with the husband) related to house repair, raising a goat for profit, leasing or buying land, or buying a boat or bicycle rickshaw; and whether money that they themselves earned was used.
- *Participation in public protests and political campaigning*: campaigning for a political candidate, or getting together with others to protest against any of the following: a man beating his wife, a man divorcing or abandoning his wife, unfair wages, unfair prices, misappropriation of relief goods, or 'high-handedness' of police or government officials.
- *Freedom from domination by the family*: whether in the past year (a) money was taken from the respondents against their will, (b) land, jewellery, or livestock was taken from them against their will, (c) they were prevented from visiting their natal homes, or (d) they were prevented from working outside the home.

Sample selection

We constructed an aggregate empowerment score, using the 2002 survey data¹ to identify two samples, as follows.

¹A composite score ranging from zero to seven was created for this purpose, using seven empowerment indicators. (In 2002 we reduced the number of indicators from ten to seven, based on prior qualitative findings.) Although the decision to establish 25 per cent as the cut-off point is somewhat arbitrary, it is consistent with the field research team's subjective assessment. Their impression, based on prior qualitative research, is that roughly 20–25 per cent of the women in the six villages stand out as being more empowered than the rest. The percentage would be somewhat higher or lower, depending on the village.

1. Mother/daughter/mother-in-law triads were identified, starting with 10 mothers and 10 mothers-in-law whose empowerment scores fell in the top 25 per cent. To be eligible, these women also had to have a daughter or daughter-in-law (and son) who had married within the past five years but more than one year ago. The other senior woman in the triad (the mother of the young married woman's as well as her mother-in-law) had to be living. In most cases the married son (or daughter's husband) or the father-in-law was also interviewed to get additional perspectives. This sample was drawn primarily for a separate investigation of the effects of women's empowerment across generations.
2. A contrasting sample of nine senior women (mothers and mothers-in-law) and nine younger women (married daughters and daughters-in-law of the senior women) was randomly selected, half from among the 25 per cent with the lowest empowerment scores and half from among the 25 per cent with the highest empowerment scores, from two of the six villages. This sample was drawn specifically for the present analysis.

Interview methods

Ethnographic interviews were undertaken with the women in the triads described above, to explore how active and effective the women who scored high on empowerment were in delaying the marriages of their daughters and the first pregnancies and births of their daughters-in-law, and in contributing to the empowerment of the younger women. Three highly experienced female researchers interviewed the women, and two experienced male researchers interviewed the men. All field researchers had master's degrees or were in master's-level graduate programmes. All interviews that contained relevant data on empowerment (22 with women from the triads and four with male relatives) were reviewed for this article.

In addition, three female researchers conducted ethnographic interviews and observations with the 18 women in the contrast sample. The interviews explored women's resources and their ability to exercise agency in spheres of life where women's access to resources and ability to exercise agency is traditionally constrained. Open-ended questions were improvised in order to tailor them to each woman's specific situation, and to encourage her to talk about her own life. We did not attempt to cover the full list of empowerment indicators in each interview, concentrating instead on a few items in each interview to generate a deeper discussion of these. To elicit data on changing norms in the research communities, we asked about each woman's own life and experiences, as well as asking her to compare herself with others in the community. We also asked men to talk about their wives, and young married women to describe their mothers and mothers-in-law, and asked whether they emulated either of these women. Examples of commonly used questions are given below.

- 'What places inside and outside your village can women now go to? Where do you go? Do you ever go to __? Why / why not? Could women go to these places in the past? What other places can women go now where they could not go in the past?'
- 'What was the economic condition of your husband's family when you first married? How has it changed? What made it change?'
- 'Did you learn all of these things by watching someone else, or did you learn on your own?'
- 'What kind of person is your mother? Your mother-in-law? How are they similar or different? Who would you most like to be like, and why?'

The field researchers stayed overnight in the research villages while collecting data, in order to observe the settings informally.

Data processing and analysis

Following each field visit, the researchers prepared written transcripts in Bengali from their taped interviews and field notes, which were translated into English. A US-based researcher coded the transcripts thematically using SPData, a text-based software programme, to organise the material.

The data were then examined with reference to each of the original indicators. In addition, the data were mined for potential new indicators that might have been missed when the original set was developed, or might have emerged in the intervening years since 1991. The US-based researcher who coded the data held a series of intensive discussion sessions with the field researchers during a visit to Dhaka to collaborate on analyses and discuss interpretations. The field researchers were asked to provide additional insights regarding the changing social, economic, and political setting in the research villages and the relevance of the indicators based on their observations during the research process.

Findings and analysis

Five of the eight original indicators still appeared to be salient, but our analysis suggested that the component items in all but one (economic security) needed updating. In addition, we identified seven new indicators, including three variables that we had previously used in multivariate analyses but had not conceptualised as empowerment indicators. In the following discussion, we first provide examples of some of the findings that led us to drop or revise certain indicators. Next we discuss our new indicators and describe the changes in the social context that make these indicators meaningful.

Dropped indicators

Three indicators were dropped: making small purchases, making larger purchases, and freedom from domination by the family. Below we describe one example.

Making small purchases—15 years previously, it was in most cases men who kept and spent money; some woman never handled it at all. Now it appears that the vast majority of women can make small purchases and do not need permission from their husbands to do so. Many women made purchases from small shops close to home or from people selling items door-to-door: sources of goods that were much less common 15 years ago. Since most of the husbands are out working in the daytime, it would be impractical for their wives to seek permission when small needs arise. Permission from in-laws had become less relevant because of a growing tendency to split into nuclear families within a few months or a year or two after marriage. In joint households some younger women's ability to make purchases was constrained, but in other cases, where the husband was earning income and did not place restrictions on his wife, this was still possible.

Women's ability to purchase small items depended more on the availability of cash than on the women's ability to exercise agency. One informant said:

'When hawkers come to sell cosmetics and ribbons, hairclips etc., I buy if I have money, otherwise I don't. Sometimes I ask for money from my mother-in-law. If she doesn't have any money, then I can't buy anything.'

Thus, the social and economic context had changed, and as a result handling and spending small amounts of money was no longer something that was done only by empowered women.

Revised indicators

Four indicators were revised. Below we describe three examples.

Mobility—The findings suggest that this indicator still has face validity, but the specific items used to measure it need to be modified to fit the changing social landscape. In contrast to the situation in the early 1990s, in 2007 women in the three research villages typically could go just about anywhere, even alone, in an emergency such as a child health problem. One young married woman said:

'When husbands are not at home, women go to pick coriander leaves from the open spaces and slopes outside the home. Women often work in the fields on moonlit nights when no one can see them. Or they work with their husbands in the fields. And they go to the bus stand and the district town if they need to see a doctor or buy medicine. Such changes have taken place here.'

Travelling alone seemed no longer to be a salient issue; however, women often avoided doing so, for safety reasons or because they simply preferred to be with a companion, as is the norm. Going to the movies was no longer a relevant measure: many households now had TVs, and a few had VCRs or DVD players, and it had become rare for women to go to the cinema. Travelling outside the village is problematic as an indicator, in that many empowered women chose not to leave their households for long periods of time due to responsibilities at home, maintaining assets or enterprises.

The market place, however, remained a zone of contention. In all of the research villages, including the three included in this study, most women avoided going to the market. The market is not a welcoming place for women, and they risk harassment and humiliation by going there. The division of labour in the household is such that the husband or sons would typically make trips to the market to buy clothing and household items. If their husband or sons were unavailable, some empowered women would go to the market themselves to buy their own saris or household items. (Poor women without husbands and sons would also do this, but interpreting that as a sign of empowerment is problematic.) Moreover, women were still generally reluctant to say that they move around for no particular reason, and there seemed to be some stigma associated with doing so. Thus, it appears that going to the market and going out simply for fun or leisure are the current 'frontiers' for women's mobility, and we revised our sub-indicators accordingly.

Legal and political awareness—Because of recent government and NGO legal-education efforts, the range of legal issues that women are becoming aware of has increased, particularly with regard to the importance of marriage registration. Issues that women who were comparatively empowered in this aspect of life knew about included inheritance rights; marriage registration; the statutory minimum age of marriage for girls; birth registration; *kabin* (an agreed amount of property that the husband promises to give his wife at marriage); whether women can initiate divorce if abused; child custody and child support in case of divorce; and the procedures for seeking traditional mediation (*shalish*) or formal legal remedy when legal rights are violated by a husband or family member.

Speaking about the benefits of *kabin*, one woman said '*A kabin ensures that a girl has some control over her husband...It gives her some power.*' A woman sampled from the lowest quarter of empowered women was unable to discuss the purpose of *kabin* nor how much *kabin* was agreed upon at the time of her marriage, despite repeated probing by the interviewer.

Overall, the more empowered women were able to discuss in greater detail and with more understanding a number of legal matters and rights issues. This indicator was split into two separate indicators (knowledge of legal rights and political awareness), and the sub-items were revised accordingly.

Participation in public protests and political campaigning—Since the early 1990s women's political participation has expanded. Both political campaigning and voting were found to be more common and meaningful than in the past. Previously we did not include voting under the heading of political participation, because the common pattern was for women to vote according to their husband's opinion, without discussion. As one woman put it, '*What he says, I will do— he knows politics, I know nothing about that.*' This is still true for many women, but there was a sub-group who said that they had recently voted for a candidate of their own choice, and two women had run for office. Some women had also begun to discuss political issues among themselves or within their families, which previously only men did. Moreover, women have begun to campaign for political candidates of their own choice. We expanded the sub-indicators to reflect this changed situation.

Another emergent dimension of political empowerment is a woman's participation in a *shalish*, or traditional mediation group. Previously it was virtually unheard of for a woman to attend a *shalish*, or even to believe that she had the right to attend. One woman commented:

'Yes, I attend most of those *shalish*...I try to make both parties understand in such a way so that no one loses anything and the relationship remains good. I comfort them and try to make sure that their disagreement doesn't escalate, and finally I deliver my verdict. I try to ensure that they both have peace in their mind.'

Participation in a *shalish* was therefore added to this indicator.

New indicators

In our list of seven new indicators, we have added three that we used in previous analyses of women's empowerment but did not treat as empowerment indicators. One is women's *education*, which we previously treated as a control variable. This was because education beyond a few years of primary school was extremely uncommon, especially among the poor. Fewer than one quarter of women in a 1992 national survey of micro-credit programme participants and eligible (from poor families) non-participants had any education at all (Hashemi *et al.* 1996). In the past 15 years, access to education has increased remarkably, especially among girls and young women, and it is now highly valued in the research sites (Schuler 2007). Statistical analysis of survey data from 2007 shows no correlation between education and our aggregate indicator of empowerment in the full 2007 sample. Among the daughters and daughters-in-law, however, there is a statistically significant correlation (not shown), confirming the idea that the older women were empowered through means other than education, whereas among the younger generation education is a more important source of empowerment.

Another indicator, *participation in a micro-credit or savings programme*, was salient even in the early 1990s when this research began, but in our initial analyses we treated this as an independent variable that we hypothesised would lead to women's empowerment (Schuler *et al.* 1994, 1997; Hashemi *et al.* 1996). We believe that *participation in a micro-credit or savings programme* can also be conceptualised as an indicator of women's empowerment and we have reclassified it as such. Beyond access to credit, belonging to a micro-credit organisation enables women to meet with their peers weekly and exposes them to new ideas. Asked what was discussed in her credit-programme meetings, one young wife replied:

'They suggest not to give or take dowry, they say child marriage should be stopped, they suggest that we keep hens and duck, goats and cows. They give us tips about how to earn income and prosper in life...I have eight hens and a goat. I am planning to sell them and buy something big with the money I get. Maybe I will buy a cow, and after a time I will sell that cow and buy two cows. These things are discussed in the [credit programme] meetings.'

Asked how she learned to run a nursery (for plants), another woman explained:

'I go to many places. I attend meetings of the [micro credit] organisation. There, the 'sirs' discuss many things, and many women attend those meetings. I discuss with them. We share our experiences and ideas. I listen carefully when other women talk about their own experiences. When I feel that an idea is good I try to implement it. That's how I've learned all these things. Moreover I have taken some training from the micro credit organisation. In that training the "sirs" gave us many ideas and suggestions. I've learned many things from that training as well.'

Similarly, we used women's contribution to family support as an independent variable predicting empowerment. In our new list of empowerment indicators we include a similar variable: *engagement in paid work outside the home*.

Access to media and phone—This new indicator of women's resources reflects whether a woman can listen to radio, watch television, or make phone calls at a neighbour's house, at a shop, or at home. Access to radio and television has significantly improved women's awareness of current events, social issues, and legal rights in the research sites. Women had begun to listen to the news and learn about political developments. For example, many were aware of the caretaker government and the state of emergency that existed at the time of this study. They also developed and shared their opinions regarding current affairs. Women whose families did not have a TV in their household often went to a neighbour's house to watch television or to one of the shops within the village where TVs are always on. Television had become an important source of information on health, sanitation and hygiene, education, rights, illegality of dowry, the impacts of early marriage and childbearing, and income-generation activities such as cow rearing and fish cultivation. Women could also learn how to formulate an argument on issues like the rights of women. An empowered 40-year-old woman told the interviewer that nowadays parents who married off an under-age daughter could face legal sanctions. *'People are not as foolish as they were in the past'*, she explained. *'People now listen to radio and watch television. From those sources they hear such things.'*

Similarly, mobile phones had begun to influence relationships among family and friends, as well as promote the dissemination of information on various topics. Women with access to a mobile phone were able to keep in touch with husbands or children living in other places for work or education. *'[My brothers] come very rarely'*, one woman told us. *'They come to visit me once a year or once every two years... I can keep in contact with them. Now, mobile phones are available. That's why we can always keep in contact with each other.'*

Women who owned, or whose families owned, a mobile phone used them for personal calls, and some women were able to generate a small income by charging other women for its use. Mobile phones have given women a safe and private way to maintain relationships and contacts, and receive support if needed. There was a shop in one of the villages that consisted of one room divided by a curtain; women used one side, and men used the other side. Anyone could come to the shop to use a cell phone in the privacy of one of these rooms. *'He [my husband] sent money and I talked with him over the mobile phone as to how to spend the money. I used to make the calls from the bazaar.'* (Before mobile phones were common, the man's relatives would probably have controlled the money that he sent home.) Thus, the spread of these technologies in rural areas has created new avenues for women's empowerment.

Self-efficacy—This new indicator of women's capacities reflects a woman's articulacy and confidence in speaking with outsiders, people of authority, children's teachers, and service providers, her confidence in her ability to disagree with her husband and other family members, and her belief that she is effective in solving family problems. When we defined the original set of empowerment indicators in the early 1990s, we considered a woman's sense of self, or

self-efficacy, but we were reluctant to rely on untested indicators of women's psychological states and were unable to identify enough instances where women's sense of self-efficacy is demonstrated to make this a meaningful indicator. Women's roles have since evolved such that some, at least, are able to demonstrate their self-confidence and personal skills in an increasing variety of social contexts.

A subset of women in the study villages was more articulate than others, expressed their opinions clearly and forthrightly, and asserted themselves more than was the norm. Husbands praised wives who were well informed and articulate, understood issues and problems, and offered better arguments to support their point of view. Neighbours described such women as *challu*, meaning someone who knew how to talk and manage things. Such women seemed confident in their abilities to manage crises by talking to people and influencing them. A young woman said of her mother, '*My ma can easily interact with anyone, male or female....She has been in town and come in contact with many people. My ma is very intelligent.*' A 40-year-old woman who had worked in the capital city and returned told us:

'Many women think ill of me because I have good relationships with men in the village. But you can go to the chairman (a local elected official) and ask him about me, see what he says...No one would say anything bad about me.'

Thus, women's roles have begun to expand, and social boundaries are stretching to accommodate a variety of manifestations of self-efficacy for women who are able to develop the requisite personal qualities and skills.

Management of family assets—This new indicator of woman's agency reflects women's engagement in keeping household accounts and making investments. A minority of women in the study villages kept either formal or informal accounts of household expenditures, including costs of daily necessities, education, and investments. Such women often claimed that their husbands did not know how to manage, save, or allocate their money. Those who kept cows might decide on the volume of milk to be sold versus consumed; those with fields would decide which field to plant or harvest on a particular day; and those with cash would decide where to invest their resources. One young woman commented:

'My mother-in-law is intelligent but she is not like my mother who is deeply intelligent...My mother does everything. She goes to the market and looks after the land and cultivation, as well as doing the cooking...Everything my father earns he gives to my mother.'

Often, such women made sacrifices to save money for the household by forgoing new clothes or presents for their natal families. Helping their families to prosper through their own labour and sacrifice was typically a source of pride. Throughout the interviews, empowered women claimed that they played an important role in the improvement of their family's standard of living. They spoke with emotion and passion about how they increased and invested their savings, inspired their husbands and sometimes sons to work, and supported them by taking loans. During times of dire need they sent their children to their parent's houses to save on expenditures and worked in other people's homes. In several cases women insisted that the researcher talk their husbands to verify these claims.

We asked about the economic condition of the husband at the time when the woman had married and joined his family, whether it had changed, and in which direction. These questions elicited enthusiastic responses from some women. Several said that they had lifted the husband's family from the '*bottom to the top*', or that the household was nothing when they came, that they had made the household what it was with their own hands, worked hard, saved money, and always taken thoughtful steps to move the family forward. Several were able to do this despite having

husbands who were not steady income-earners, and they were able to induce and support their husbands to begin earning regularly. One woman stated:

‘I make the greater contribution to my family. I have intelligently made all these things for the family. My husband would do a job and give his salary to me... My husband only supported the family financially. I applied my intelligence to put things together in the family...I was determined about buying a piece of land and building a house.’

Another empowered woman said proudly:

‘Do you see these buildings? All were constructed by me. I have raised this house putting my own hands together with professional labourers. My husband only provided the money –he does not take notice of things involving the family. I have to visit the market to buy everyday necessities. I have to look after the education of the children, I have to arrange their marriages. I have to do everything.’

A 65-year-old man said of his wife:

‘She does the book-keeping and she is good at it. She suggests ways that we can keep our expenses down, and how we can best maintain our family. She always gives me good ideas and suggestions.’

In some cases, management of family assets means management of family members by suggesting certain types of work for them, or inducing them to work by keeping them in the dark about the family’s assets. One woman was worried that her husband would compensate for her earnings by slacking off in his own work:

‘He is a man. As a man he would rebuke me when he found out (about my savings) and would not want to go for work. He would indulge in laziness, would stay at home.’

Thus, a significant minority of women now stand out from others by virtue of their management of family assets.

Box 1 summarises the revised list of indicators discussed above.

Box 1

Revised list of indicators

Indicators representing women’s capacities and resources include the following:

- **Access to media and phone** (e.g. a woman can listen to radio, watch television, or make phone calls at a neighbour’s house, at a shop, or at home).
- **Economic security** (e.g. a woman owns her house or homestead land, a productive asset, cash savings).
- **Education** (e.g. highest level of education attained).
- **Legal awareness** (e.g. a woman knows what property rights women have, can explain the significance of registering births and marriages, knows laws governing divorce, desertion, and child custody, domestic violence).
- **Political awareness** (e.g. a woman knows the names and roles of the female representatives from her area).
- **Self-efficacy** (e.g. a woman’s articulateness and confidence in speaking with outsiders, people of authority, children’s teachers, service providers; confidence in ability to disagree with husband, other family members, belief that she is effective in solving family problems).

- **Social support** (e.g. a woman has frequent contact with her natal family; can call a relative living in another village; there is someone in the village whom she can go to when she is in financial trouble/sick/in need of help; someone sometimes helps or visits her when she is sick; she sometimes visits other women in the village just for socialising).

Indicators representing women's agency include the following:

- **Engagement in paid work outside the home.**
- **Involvement in major household decisions** (e.g. participates in family decisions individually or jointly with the husband on issues related to family members working outside the home, marrying a son or daughter, children's education, separating the family, house repairs, raising livestock for profit, leasing or buying land, investments).
- **Management of family assets** (e.g. a woman keeps household accounts; makes investments).
- **Mobility** (e.g. a woman goes out on occasion just because she wants to; can go to market if needed).
- **Participation in a micro-credit or savings programme.**
- **Political participation** (e.g. a woman discusses politics and candidates with family and/or other women; campaigns for a candidate; votes for candidate of own choice; joins with others to protest a social injustice; or participates in a *shalish*).

Discussions and conclusions

The findings from this study suggest that social, political, and economic changes at the micro level, many of which reflect macro-level changes, can have substantial implications for the measurement of women's empowerment. In the 15–16 years since our culture-specific empowerment indicators were developed, women in rural Bangladesh have begun to develop new capacities, acquire resources, and respond to a widening array of opportunities, and social norms have begun to change to allow them to do so. Thus, we found that several of our original empowerment indicators were no longer relevant; and several were still conceptually relevant but probably could be measured more effectively by changing the sub-indicators associated with them. There were also a number of new aspects in which women were becoming empowered that could be added to our original list.

As Bangladesh does not particularly stand out from other developing countries in the pace of the social, economic, and political changes occurring there, it is likely that culture-specific measures of women's empowerment in other settings would also age and need to be replaced. One might ask, then, how empowerment indicators can be useful for tracking progress, if we are to change them continually. We would argue that the extent to which empowerment indicators should be revised should depend on the purpose for which empowerment is being measured. If the purpose is to track macro-level change over time, or compare women's empowerment across countries, then some degree of standardisation is clearly necessary. In such cases, indicators used may be less culture-specific, less precise in capturing the phenomenon of empowerment, and less subject to change. In contrast, if the purpose of measuring empowerment is to link it with other variables of interest in a micro-level study, one would want to strive for as much precision as possible in capturing salient aspects of empowerment at a particular point in time, in a particular setting; and for this it may be

necessary to redefine and adapt indicators developed previously and/or in a somewhat different setting.

The measurement of women's empowerment is also fraught with other challenges. The effect of a woman's life stage is one example. For example, even if the study population is confined to currently married women, there are pronounced variations in the restrictions on agency that a recently married woman faces, compared with a woman who has been married for several years. Moreover, in the context of low education, when a woman's ability to earn income depends to a significant extent on her physical strength, women at the other end of the age spectrum may also be at a disadvantage when their ability to work and earn diminishes, and they may lose some of their ability to exercise agency. Thus, in some cases, studies of women's empowerment may benefit by restricting their samples to women in certain age groups. Poverty can influence empowerment by limiting opportunities to invest money, and since decision making regarding investment and consumption is often an important component of empowerment, the existence of economic inequality makes it difficult to develop indicators that apply equally to all women. (This problem also occurs with national-level indicators such as UNDP's Gender Empowerment Measure [Cueva Betata 2006].) Therefore, insofar as possible, questions should be designed to apply to women with few resources, as well as to women with more, and non-economic decisions should also be considered. Finally, husband's characteristics can play a big role in encouraging or limiting empowerment. A good number of the empowered women in our research sites became so after their husbands fell ill, failed at their enterprises, or simply declined to work. Other women had been constrained in pursuing empowerment by husbands who were especially patriarchal and controlling. Qualitative studies can describe these kinds of factor in analysing empowerment, but it is more difficult to adjust for them in quantitative analyses. Finally, there is a need for more multi-level studies to measure the relative effects of community-level norms related to empowerment, which in some cases may be better predictors than individual-level empowerment measures (Mason 2005; Mason and Smith 2003).

To conclude, empowerment is typically conceptualised as a process, and therefore change is at its very essence. Once a resource, capacity, or form of agency becomes commonplace, it no longer distinguishes more empowered women from less empowered women. Therefore, we would argue, the measurement of empowerment must change and adapt to keep up with this elusive phenomenon.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the National Institutes of Health for supporting this research under grant # 1R21HD053580–01/02. We are also indebted to the Bangladesh Women's Health Coalition (BWHC) for in-country institutional support – in particular, to Executive Director Anwarul Azim, Deputy Executive Director Dr Julia Ahmed, MIS Director Hasina Chakladar, AED project research manager Shamsul Huda Badal, and research team members Khurshida Begum, Shefali Akter, Shamema Nasrin and Mohammad Hossain. Finally, we thank Lisa M. Bates of Columbia University for her perceptive comments on a previous draft. The interpretations and conclusions contained herein do not necessarily reflect those of the funding agency or of the Academy for Educational Development (AED).

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