

Using qualitative methods to understand the local meaning of women's empowerment

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The qualitative study undertaken in Ethiopia in August 2017 has led to some interesting findings on the local definitions of women's empowerment⁷ from the perspective of rural women and men in two Woredas of Ethiopia. This paper shares some of the key highlights from a study we carried out to assess how strategies and interventions of a Rural Women Economic Empowerment programme have contributed to the empowerment of women.

The UNJP-RWEE⁸ programme in Ethiopia strives to strengthen women's access to financial and non-financial services in order to accelerate rural women's economic empowerment. This support is coupled with other integrated interventions such as: improving food security and nutrition of rural women and their households; developing individual capabilities and understanding of their rights; fostering access to markets and agricultural inputs; promoting income-generating activities; and, strengthening women's participation in and benefits from community and rural institutions such as, cooperatives and farmer's associations.

The UNJP RWEE is one of the 13 agricultural development projects under the second phase of IFPRI's Gender, Agriculture, and Assets Project (GAAP2) that are piloting and validating a project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI). The study assessed the extent to which the project has been effective in achieving its goal of economically empowering rural women in Ethiopia. The findings will also inform pro-WEAI domains and indicators. As the programme is working only with women, we conducted group discussions with female programme beneficiaries and male indirect beneficiaries (spouses or male relatives). The study focused on two project sites, i.e., two *Woredas* (districts) of Adami Tulu and Yaya Gulele districts, in Oromia regional state of Ethiopia.

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⁷ Empowerment has been defined as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices, particularly in contexts where this ability had been denied to them (Kabeer, 2001). Empowerment in Agriculture is defined as one's ability to make decisions on matters related to agriculture as well as one's access to the materials and social resources needed to carry out those decisions (Alkire et al., 2013)

⁸ The UN Joint Programme on Accelerating progress towards the economic empowerment Rural Women's (UNJP-RWEE) is implemented by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development, World Food Programme and UN Women.

In order to capture the impact of the programme's intervention on rural women's lives, it was important to understand how women and men alike define empowerment, and how it was perceived locally. We also explored how it is manifested and the positive outcomes that are derived from being empowered. This was important in order to understand the trajectory of Ethiopian women's empowerment.

Recognizing that the definition of empowerment is highly context specific, we realized that a survey-based quantitative measurement might not be able to capture the various nuances of the concept. Therefore, we used qualitative tools, including focus groups and in-depth interviews with women and men who were locally identified as being empowered and disempowered, to better capture the local definition of empowerment and to describe complex related aspects such as status, self-esteem, and most importantly, perceptions by individuals and communities, of what it means to be an empowered man or woman in the community.

We explored the local definition of empowerment by asking both women and men to describe a woman and man who is 'strong' or 'a role model' within or outside the community. We chose these terms because, during the field-testing exercises, when women and men were initially asked for the characteristics of an empowered woman, community members provided examples of a submissive, docile woman who is quiet and non-confrontational. As a result, we revised the probing questions to include "strong" or "role model". We also asked the men and women to tell us the characteristics of the kind of woman who other women would admire, or the kind of woman they would aspire for their daughters to become.

We found out that there is no equivalent word in the local language of Afan Oromo; however, the words "*cimina*⁹ and *gahumsa*¹⁰," were identified as closely related terms. The terms mainly represent the ideal characteristics of a woman/man in the community and are reflective of the ideals of femininity and masculinity embedded in the society's cultural framework, which describes an empowered person as someone who is strong/able/capable, acceptable, and respectable.

With further probing, we found that empowerment has various dimensions: (i) ability to meet socially constructed roles; (ii) participation in diversified livelihood activities; (iii) ability to use agriculture technology; (iv) ability to create wealth by saving and investing; (v) having knowledge; (vi) having good conduct and acceptance within the community; (vii) active participation in meetings; (viii) ability to manage time efficiently, and; (ix) ability to use family planning (only for women).

In the following sections we share some examples that emerged during the community discussions:

⁹ An Afan Oromo term *Cimina* (noun) means strength or ability. *Cimtuu* (for female) and *cimaa* (for male) means he/she who is strong/able.

¹⁰ An Afan Oromo term *Gahumsa* (noun) means capability/capacity. *Kan gahumsa qabu* (for male) and *kan gahumsa qabdu* (for female) means he/she who has capability/capacity.

In both Woredas, men's and women's group discussions indicated that the ability to meet one's prescribed social roles was an important dimension of empowerment. Specifically, for men that means providing for the family by meeting the family members' needs for food, clothing, shoes, education, and medication - and thus improving the family's quality of life. On the other hand, for women this means taking good care of the family (by feeding the family properly, providing support to their spouses, sending children to school, and maintaining hygiene/cleanliness at home and outside of the house).

Another finding of the study was that men and women who participate in a variety of income generating activities are considered empowered. For men, the income generating activities included crop production, cattle fattening, wage employment, and others. For women, these comprised selling local alcoholic drinks, vegetables, handcrafts, poultry products such as eggs and chicken, dairy products, and other petty trade.

In this regard, the UNJP RWEE programme contributes to women's empowerment through provision of access to loans, farm inputs, and technical trainings to women, which in turn increases their participation in income generating activities. The programme provides access to credit for a large number of women and helps them diversify their livelihood options. The various trainings provided to women by the programme have helped them to gain better information and knowledge. Women felt that the trainings are building their capacity to participate in different livelihood activities, effectively manage their financial resources, and play their social roles as well as meet social expectations. The other trainings on sanitation, hygiene, and safe water access also help women to meet their social roles and expectations. Trainings on women's rights are crucial to increase women's awareness of their self-worth, their individual rights, and the available options. As a result, women said they are in a better position to make informed choices, helping women boost their confidence.

One woman, a beneficiary of the programme, described herself in the following way:

Now the community perceives me as a model woman. I am known for my farming. I have been accepted by the community. An empowered woman is she who participates actively in agriculture and community affairs and can make decisions by herself. UNJP RWEE also empowered me by giving me training and credit. In the future I want to have shop. ... I want to be a model woman in every direction.

A 30-year-old empowered woman

Men and women who are educated and/or educate their children are empowered because of the knowledge they have acquired, as compared to illiterate people and/or people who do not send their children to school. Women discussants felt particularly that their activities were limited to

the home because of lack of education and awareness about their rights and potentials. Towards this end, the programme offers women adult literacy classes which has led to empowerment.

During women's group discussions, it emerged in particular that the participation of a woman in community issues is an exceptionally empowering aspect because they feel that this would increase their awareness about their rights and their potential. A men's group discussion described a woman who shows ability in community leadership as empowered. While women who do not have the ability to lead the community and are too shy to speak during community meetings were described as disempowered.

I am a woman who can explain her ideas clearly. I am not educated but I am knowledgeable. I have good position in the community, because of my knowledge. An empowered woman is she who has a good behaviour, uses credit properly, is knowledgeable, shares her knowledge and contributes to the community. I am also empowered because I am able to participate in farming of crops and vegetables, educate my children and speak at community meeting, as I am a UNJP RWEE beneficiary.

A 40-year-old empowered woman

We found that the characteristics of an empowered man and woman are well aligned with the proposed pro-WEAI domains and indicators of empowerment. Having knowledge was considered empowering by both men and women (as knowledge is power). The difference between the empowering domains and indicators for women and men is that mobility, knowledge and education, ability to attend and speak in public meetings, and proper administration of the home are more empowering to women. On the other hand, accumulation of resources or wealth, working hard on the farm, knowledge of good technologies, and proper family administration are key for men. Interestingly, time was not assessed in terms of workload or leisure (as proposed in pro-WEAI) but in terms of being able to plan and use time effectively and being hardworking.

What can we conclude?

In identifying the local definitions of empowerment, social and cultural aspects emerge clearly and need to be considered. Empowerment is not only about the 'ability to decide' or 'make a choice' but it is also about the conduct, respect, and trustworthiness of a person both within the household and community. Our results show that the moral being of a man or woman is very important and valued by society. If we focus on individual 'choice' alone, then this emphasizes individual independence. Our qualitative work showed clearly that the local definition of empowerment also recognizes that a woman has a relationship with her husband and with society.

Similar to the pro-WEAI quantitative indicators, we found that empowerment also includes the ability to have a voice, engage in decision-making on valuable assets/resources, and influence

decisions in situations where norms, culture, and policy are not constraining. Based on the findings, it might be important to differentiate empowerment in relation to agricultural production and empowerment in relation to non-agricultural aspects (e.g., ability to educate children). The causal relationships need to be clearly discerned to delineate empowerment in agriculture and how it contributes to empowerment outside the agricultural domain.

Finally, we found that empowerment has many emotional elements which are best elicited using qualitative methods. Qualitative methods provide flexibility to further disentangle domains and indicators defined in the pro-WEAI. Empowerment is also subject to various local meanings and conceptualizations that are difficult to quantify. For example, dimensions such as good conduct, patience, someone who thinks about the family, etc., emerged as measures of empowerment by the locals, and yet were difficult to measure and quantify.

Finally, we found that empowerment is an issue of individual and group perceptions, and the socio-cultural context always informs the way societies define the concept.