



Understanding women's empowerment and its determinants in post-communist countries: Results of Azerbaijan national survey



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ABSTRACT

Using data from 1451 women from the Azerbaijan Demographic and Health Survey (AZDHS), the present study provided an evaluation of Kishor's (2000) framework for women's empowerment through an investigation of the relationship between four sources of empowerment (education, relative education compared to partner, relative earnings compared to partner, wealth index) and five settings of empowerment (age, population density, region of residence, community education, and community wealth) on the level of evidence of women's empowerment in three areas (women's participation in household decision making, attitudes towards wife beating, and women's ability to refuse sexual intercourse). Findings suggest that the relationship between sources, settings, and evidence of empowerment is at times paradoxical, particularly for women who achieve equal or higher educational or earning status in relation to their male partners. Implications of these findings for the further refinement of theoretical models of women's empowerment which centralize an analysis of patriarchy are provided.

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Achieving gender equality is considered an important development objective. The United Nation's Beijing Platform for Action called upon the international community to prioritize women's empowerment in twelve critical areas in September 1995, a call that almost twenty years later remains inspirational but has yet to be fully attained (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2015). In recognition of the ongoing nature of this call, gender equality and women's empowerment were identified as key Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by year 2015 (United Nations Development Program, 2003). Moreover, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment is considered vital to achieving other development goals (United Nations Population Fund, 2006).

Indeed, the positive impact of women's empowerment is well-documented in the literature. Women's empowerment is positively associated with lower levels of domestic violence (Visaria, 2008), lower levels of HIV/AIDS (Silverman, Decker, Saggurti, Balaiah, & Raj, 2008), and reductions in under-nutrition (Hindin, 2006). Women's empowerment is also positively associated with higher levels of natural family planning (Affi, 2007), higher levels of maternal services utilization (Sharma, Sawangdee, & Sirirassamee, 2007), higher body mass index (Hindin, 2006), higher children's primary school enrollment (Huisman & Smits, 2009) and a number of positive demographic effects (Sulaja,

2004). Finally, women's empowerment is deemed necessary to the achievement of broader objectives of socio-economic development and poverty reduction, especially in developing countries (Gupta & Yesudian, 2006).

This study investigated evidence of women's empowerment and its determinants in Azerbaijan, a transitional country, located between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. While a growing body of both government reports and scholarly literature has emerged in the post-Soviet period documenting the status of women in Azerbaijan (see Heyat, 2002, 2006, 2008; Najafizadeh & Mennerick, 2003; Tohidi, 1996, 1997, 2004; Yunus, Tahirova, & Alakbarova, 2004), this study extends this work through the empirical examination of a model of women's empowerment inclusive of sources, settings, and evidence of women's empowerment (Kishor, 2000). As such, this study makes a contribution not only to the descriptive literature on the present status of women in Azerbaijan but also provides critical insight into the processes which promote it.

Empowerment as a process and an outcome

The elusive nature of women's empowerment is complicated, in part, due to the lack of universal consensus on what constitutes empowerment. In highlighting the ambiguous nature of empowerment in scholarly communities, Sheilds (1995) contends that "it is a term that is ultimately co-optable due to its multidisciplinary use and the lack of conceptual definition...Subsequently, there seems to be an almost endless array of definitions depending on the discipline and the exposure of

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a particular author" (p. 16). A range of definitions have been applied in the published literature that position empowerment at multiple spaces across the ecological continuum. For example, [Moghadam and Senftova \(2005\)](#) define empowerment "as a multi-dimensional process of civil, political, social, economic, and cultural participation and rights" (p. 390). In contrast to this conceptualization of empowerment within a structural context, [Johnson, Worell, and Chandler \(2005\)](#) define empowerment as an intra- and inter- personal construct: "enabling women to access skills and resources to cope more effectively with current as well as future stress and trauma" (p. 109). Others construct empowerment as inclusive of both psychological and socio-political dimensions. For instance, [Zimmerman \(1995\)](#) characterizes empowerment as "a series of experiences in which individuals learn to see a closer correspondence between their goals and a sense of how to achieve them, gain greater access to and control over resources and where people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives" (p. 583).

Although scholars have yet to concur on a universal definition of empowerment, commonalities have emerged across the literature in its description. [Boehm and Staples \(2004\)](#) cite four recurrent key themes prevalent across the empowerment literature: (1) empowerment is both a process and an outcome, (2) empowerment encompasses both the personal and the collective, (3) empowerment is based on the premise that those in positions of relative powerlessness possess resources that can be utilized for change, (4) empowerment can be facilitated by others but not created for others; individuals and groups must claim power for themselves ([Boehm & Staples, 2004](#)). In sum, Boehm and Staples argue that "empowerment focuses on oppressed groups in society, on a better understanding of the way in which inequality and lack of power perpetuate personal and social problems. It is concerned with stigmatization and unequal structural relations of power as well as the means for achieving social and economic justice" (p. 271).

Within the development literature, women in development approaches historically have centered on key indicators (e.g. education, access to contraception, life expectancy, fertility rates, etc.) in both the conceptualization and measurement of women's empowerment. For example, in a foundational work on women's status, [Janet Giele \(1977\)](#) identified six dimension of women's status which have since commonly served as proxies for women's empowerment: (1) Political expression, (2) Work and mobility, (3) Family formation, duration, and size, (4), Education, (5) Health and sexual control, and (6) Cultural expression. More recently, such approaches have been criticized for a limited focus on the availability of opportunities/choice for women within social, cultural, and political arenas rather than a consideration of women's abilities to act upon such opportunities/choice ([Mehra, 1997](#)). Education, for example, is an important resource which can facilitate women's empowerment; however, education can only be a mechanism for empowerment if women are able to access and apply it to exert power in their lives. [Mehra \(1997\)](#) notes that cultural, social, and institutional barriers may interfere with women's capacity to access and exercise choice even when opportunities are available in their social milieu. As such, Mehra argues, commonly cited indicators of women's empowerment, such as access to employment, education, and contraception, may be better conceptualized as contexts for women's empowerment rather than evidence of its actual attainment.

In considering women's empowerment, scholars further have noted the importance of differentiating between power and choice. Indeed, [Kabeer \(1999\)](#) distinguishes between first order choices (which she defines as "strategic life choices which are critical for people to live the lives they want to live", p. 437) and second order choices (characterized as "less consequential choices which may be important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters", p. 437). If patriarchal social structures dictate male supremacy, it may be that some women make the calculated choice to comply with subservience in the realm of second order choices (such as engaging in sex when she is not in the mood) in order to preserve the ability to enact

first order choices (such as engagement in employment or education). Such tradeoffs complicate conceptualizations of empowerment as it suggests that women may voluntarily choose to relinquish power in certain realms of their lives in order to retain it in others.

Consistent with such criticisms, [Kishor \(2000\)](#) has noted the fallacy of relying on key indicators/benchmarks as proxies for women's empowerment, as such sources of empowerment may not necessarily translate into real power in all domains for all women. Kishor problematizes research which narrowly equates the attainment of demographic goals, such as increased education and employment rates, with women's empowerment for failing to measure whether such attainment has corresponded to an actual increase in women's control over their own "lives, bodies, and environments" (p. 124). Critical to this is a differentiation between the measurement of empowerment as a *process* (which measures the presence and utilization of building blocks that are venues for empowerment such as education, employment, etc.) and the measurement of empowerment as an *outcome* (which measures the extent to which women actually exert control in their lives and social environments). Kishor argues that a comprehensive measurement of women's empowerment, therefore, must examine not only factors which facilitate empowerment as a process but also indices of empowerment as an outcome.

As such, [Kishor \(2000\)](#) developed a framework for empowerment inclusive of three key indicators: (1) indicators of *evidence* of empowerment (the extent of power and control women yield over their lives, such as women's beliefs in gender equality, women's control over decision making, freedom of movement, bodily integrity, etc.), (2) indicators of *sources* of empowerment (the building blocks which can facilitate empowerment, such as education, employment, access to finances, etc.), and (3) indicators of *settings* for empowerment (the individual attributes of women and the proximal and distance environments of their lives, such as factors in one's family of origin and community, which create contexts for empowerment). Such a conceptualization acknowledges the multifaceted and dynamic nature of empowerment across multiple domains. As stated by Kishor,

"to define it as if the process is complete so that women can be classified as either empowered or not empowered would fail to capture reality. Instead, the reality is more likely to be that women are at varying stages along the process of becoming empowered. At one end will be some women who are not only not empowered (that is, give no evidence of any control over their lives) but also have no access to potential sources of empowerment and live in environments that inhibit any possibility of empowerment. At the other end will be a few women who are empowered. However, the large majority of women will be those that score high on some indicators of each element of empowerment, evidence, sources, and settings, but not all. If empowerment is conceptualized strictly in terms of the control women exercise over their lives, the gains that women are making in the process of empowerment would be ignored" (pp. 134–135).

Other authors have similarly characterized empowerment in a development context as a multi-faceted construct. Similar to Kishor's framework of evidence, sources, and settings for empowerment, [Gupta and Yesudian \(2006\)](#) reference [Kabeer's \(1999\)](#) conceptualization of empowerment as encompassing resources, agency, and achievement. *Resources* are defined as "factors that are the catalyst for empowerment and not the empowerment per se" (p. 366). *Agency* references women's ability to utilize resources to gain choice, autonomy, and control in decisions affecting their lives. *Achievements* are defined as "the well-being outcomes that women experience as a result of access to resources and agency" (p. 366). Thus, regardless of the specific terminology employed, there appears to be congruence in the development literature that empowerment is a multi-dimensional construct inclusive of the tools which women need to draw upon power, their ability to subsequently harness that power to enact choice in their lives, and the resulting improvements such choice renders in their health, well-being, and quality of life.

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