



## Measuring 'empowerment' using quantitative household survey data



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### SYNOPSIS

For poor women paid work is not simply a pathway out of poverty, but has more deeper transformative potential, including both internal transformation (changes in women's personal and political consciousness and agency as citizens) and external transformation (changes in women's social position). Hence, measurement of women's empowerment requires identifying appropriate qualitative indicators to capture these dynamic processes of change that are not all observable. We were faced with two crucial measurement challenges: first, to estimate the magnitude and nature of women's paid work that is often unrecognized, and second, to assess a transformative process like women's empowerment. The paper describes the methods used for enumerating women's economic activity and measuring women's empowerment in the context of Bangladesh, using quantitative indicators estimated from a large household survey. Our experience suggests that to capture women's work adequately interviewer bias due to social perception of work can be minimized through training and capacity building and careful wording of questions that have been pretested. In addition, to gain a more nuanced understanding of the impact of paid work on the process of women's empowerment we included several new indicators for assessing various dimensions of empowerment that have been examined widely in the literature.

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### Introduction

In a recent research that examined paid work as a pathway of women's empowerment (Kabeer, Mahmud, & Tasneem, 2011), we were faced with two crucial measurement challenges. The first was to estimate the magnitude and nature of women's paid work which often goes unrecognized, and the second was to assess a transformative process like women's empowerment using quantitative indicators. Despite a renewed interest in measuring empowerment indicators in a more systematic manner (Narayan, 2005), the conceptualization of women's empowerment is generally framed in the context of poverty reduction. Since poverty is now well understood to mean more than just insufficient income to meet basic needs,<sup>1</sup> poor women as a group are doubly marginalized: they not only are poor but

are disempowered vis-à-vis men. Hence, for poor women paid work is seen as both poverty reducing and empowering. The poverty framing of empowerment fits only partially with our own conceptualization of paid work as a pathway of women's empowerment, because we see this pathway as much more than poverty reducing, to include both internal transformation (changes in women's personal and political consciousness and agency as citizens) and external transformation (changes in women's social position). Hence, measurement of women's empowerment requires identifying appropriate qualitative indicators to capture these dynamic processes of change.

In Bangladesh 'work' is commonly understood as an activity that produces goods and/or services having a market value. Since women spend much of their labour time on work inside the home, both paid and unpaid self employment or on the family farm or enterprise, as well as on care giving which includes domestic tasks, most of this work is seen as non market or 'unproductive' work. One practical fallout of this social

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perception of women's work is that much of it, including often paid or market work, remains invisible leading to the under counting of women's work in official statistics, a long standing problem in Bangladesh (and elsewhere). Bangladesh is experiencing a more rapidly growing female labour force compared to the male labour force.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that the non recognition of large numbers women workers in official statistics is taking place even as women are entering the labour force at a faster pace than men, particularly during the last decade (Mahmud & Tasneem, 2010). Thus, enumerating women's economic activity remains difficult, especially in large household surveys that collect information on family members' labour supply from the household head who is usually a man.

This paper describes the methods used for enumerating women's economic activity and the process of measuring women's empowerment in the context of Bangladesh, using quantitative indicators estimated from a large household survey. The paper is organized as follows: the second section discusses the conceptualization of empowerment and identification of indicators of empowerment; the third section describes the process of adequately enumerating women's economic activity using standard labour force questions; the fourth section describes the measurement of empowerment; and the last section points to challenges and lessons learnt.

### **Conceptualizing women's empowerment and identifying appropriate indicators for measurement**

Understanding the relationship between women's empowerment and development outcomes such as their participation in paid work or education levels is an increasing focus of development research, particularly since the era of 'smart economics'. However, the process of women's empowerment is still poorly understood and the causal relationships are not at all self evident. Furthermore, measurement of empowerment is plagued both by conceptual and by methodological challenges. For survey data in particular, a major hurdle is employing indicators at one point in time to assess a transforming process like empowerment. Quantitative variables are not the best suited to measure qualitative characteristics that are commonly recognized as elements<sup>3</sup> of empowerment, although (as we shall show later) this is not impossible. Complexities are introduced in moving from universal concepts of empowerment to context specific measures. There is further complexity because empowerment can be manifested at different levels (individual, household/family, community, state) and across various inter related dimensions (cognitive, economic, political and social).

In addition, the direction of causality is not always evident and the process can be circular: does participation in paid work lead to empowerment or does women's agency increase propensity for labour force participation? This point is taken up in greater detail in a later section of the paper.

The fact that empowerment has associated responsibility and/or costs that may curtail certain freedoms or increase certain vulnerabilities often goes unrecognized. It is because empowerment often comes at a price that assessing the relationship between development outcomes and empowerment is difficult. For example, women's greater mobility and visibility may increase social recognition but also lead to increased exposure to violence; their increased role in decision-making may ensure that their priorities are addressed but also cause

men to take less collective responsibility and even withdraw support. However, these costs need not negate the gains in terms of increased agency and capacity to reflect and make informed choices.

Measurement of empowerment using survey data has conventionally approached empowerment in a narrow sense, concentrating on identifying statistical relationships between 'initial conditions' that define women's status (like education, labour force participation, NGO membership) and wellbeing outcomes like family planning use, role in decision making and mobility in the public domain, controlling for household characteristics (see Mahmud, Shah, & Becker, 2012 for discussion). Much less attention has been paid to understanding whether changes in these status variables led to 'empowerment from within' in terms of their political consciousness or attitudes and aspirations, or to 'empowerment' at the community level such as improvements in women's social standing and weakening of restrictive gender norms.

The understanding of empowerment that informs our analysis is influenced by our personal experiences as women who were born and brought up in Bangladesh as well as by our political standpoint as feminist scholars who are committed to a just and democratic society. In a context in which women have learnt from childhood to internalise the inferior status ascribed to them by their society, changes at the level of individual consciousness and personal relationships would appear to have an intrinsic value, regardless of whether they are accompanied by changes in the larger society. At the same time, we believe that change that is limited to the level of the individual will have little impact on the larger structures of patriarchal constraint that oppress all women. We are therefore also interested in whether paid work has impacted on women's political consciousness and attitudes, their awareness of their rights, their agency as citizens and on their willingness to take collective action against social injustice (see Kabeer, 2008). This does not rule out attention to the impact of paid work on more conventional indicators, such as role in household decision making, control over income and mobility in the public domain, which have been extensively used in the literature in Bangladesh.

### **Enumerating women's economic activity**

The Bangladesh Pathways Work was focused on assessing the impact of paid work on women's lives in a context where the denial of economic opportunities to women, and their resulting dependence on male providers, has long been seen as the structural underpinning of their subordinate status. This is beginning to change in recent years with a gradual expansion in opportunities for paid work for women (Kabeer et al., 2011).

The official definition of work or economic activity, the term preferred by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), is based on the ILO definition,<sup>4</sup> and is actually quite inclusive. Despite the broad based definition, however, the manner in which such statistics are routinely collected is not conducive to an adequate enumeration of women's work, and even women themselves often do not recognize their labour activity as 'work'. The result is that a large proportion of women who engage in economic activities of various kinds are designated as 'housewives' in the official labour force, i.e. persons

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