



## Women's empowerment in East Africa: Development of a cross-country comparable measure

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### ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment is an indicator of social change and a priority of the Sustainable Development Goals. Debate continues on what domains constitute women's empowerment and how to measure empowerment across countries. Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) are the most widely available source of data on women's empowerment. However, measurement invariance often is assumed, but not tested. We used DHS data from Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda to test factor structure and measurement invariance of women's empowerment among married women ages 15–49. Factor analysis confirmed a three-latent-domain model of women's empowerment in each country capturing women's human/social assets, gender attitudes related to wife abuse, and women's participation in household decisions. Multi-country confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) identified an invariant three-factor model of women's empowerment and a subset of country-specific items. Our results offer a standardized, invariant measure of women's empowerment that can be applied to monitor women's empowerment cross-nationally in East Africa, and possibly beyond.

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### 1. Introduction

The empowerment of women is a salient measure of social change (Kabeer, 1999), and a priority embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). Women's empowerment is defined as the process through which individuals attain “the ability to make choices” under conditions in which choice was previously denied (Kabeer, 1999, p. 436). Women's empowerment is an identified end in itself (Kabeer, 2005; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Yount, VanderEnde, Dodell, & Cheong, 2016). Women's empowerment also enhances their ability to attain instrumental outcomes, such as improvements in their and their children's health and nutrition (Pratley, 2016; Carlson, Kordas, & Murray-Kolb, 2015), women's greater control over sexuality and fertility (James-Hawkins, Peters, VanderEnde, Bardin, & Yount, 2016), and mitigation and prevention of intimate partner violence (Koenig, Ahmed, Hossain, & Mozumder, 2003; Miedema,

Shwe, & Kyaw, 2016; Yount, 2005). Thus, the measurement of women's empowerment is a key area for evidence-based development policy. Indeed, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development prioritizes women's empowerment in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #5: to achieve gender equality and empowerment among all women and girls (United Nations, 2015).

Yet, we lack consensus on (1) what domains constitute women's empowerment and (2) how to measure women's empowerment across countries. Global gender and development indices tend to rank by country, creating conditions of cross-national comparison. These indices, such as the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), focus on educational and economic aspects of women's empowerment and gender equality (Klasen & Schüler, 2011). More recent indices, such as the Women, Peace and Security index, rank countries based on additional dimensions of social inclusion, justice and security (Klugman et al., 2017). Yet, these measures omit salient domains of women's empowerment, such as women's self-reported human, social and economic resources for empowerment (Kabeer 1999), as well as *attitudinal and behavioral evidence* of empowerment, such as women's attitudes about gender and violence against women, their freedom of movement and their domestic, sexual, and reproductive decision-making (Mistry, Galal, & Lu, 2009, Upadhyay & Hindin, 2005; Yount et al., 2016).

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Cross-national measurement of women's empowerment similarly lacks consensus. Different approaches to operationalization and measurement of empowerment inhibit accurate cross-country comparison (Carlson et al., 2015; Pratley 2016; Richardson, 2017). Measurement items are summed to create empowerment scores (Bogale, Wondafrash, Tilahun, & Girma, 2011; Na, Jennings, Talegawkar, & Ahmed, 2015; Upadhyay & Hindin, 2005) or dichotomized, such that women are either empowered or not (Upadhyay & Karasek, 2012). These empowerment outcomes cannot be compared directly (Richardson, 2017), and can lead to contradictory associations with other development outcomes (Carlson et al., 2015; Pratley, 2016). Other studies compare measures of women's empowerment across countries using comparable measures (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006; Kishor & Subaiya, 2008; Na et al., 2015; Ghuman, Lee, & Smith, 2006). Yet, with some exceptions (Agarwala & Lynch, 2006; Ghuman et al., 2006), cross-national measurement validation of a measure for women's empowerment is lacking. Measurement validation refers to procedures to assess and validate the measurement properties of dimensions of women's empowerment across contexts. Without measurement validation, it is unclear whether measures of empowerment operate in the same way in different countries. Thus, the appropriateness of cross-national comparison on measures of women's empowerment, as well as associations with health is uncertain.

Recently, a new index was proposed to monitor SDG #5, using DHS items on women's empowerment (Ewerling et al., 2017). While we applaud the authors' effort to move the field of empowerment measurement forward, considerable limitations exist with the SWPER. Measures of women's empowerment require grounding in the vast interdisciplinary literature and theory on empowerment, rather than the ad hoc selection of available items (Richardson 2017; Yount, Peterman & Cheong, 2018). The authors are unable to demonstrate cross-country measurement invariance of their index. Items pertaining to women's empowerment may not be comparable across countries unless the measurement properties of the items are shown to be similar (Richardson, 2018; Yount et al., 2018).

To move the field forward, we conducted a theoretically informed measurement evaluation of a measure for women's empowerment across five East African countries. We evaluated whether items on women's empowerment were measurement invariant across countries, and whether a subset of items was context specific. We used the most recent Demographic and Health Survey (DHS-VI and DHS-VII) data sets for Ethiopia (Central Statistical Agency [Ethiopia] & ICF International 2011), Kenya (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) & ICF International 2014), Rwanda (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) [Rwanda], Ministry of Health (MOH) [Rwanda], & ICF International 2010), Tanzania (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) & ICF International 2010) and Uganda (Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) and Macro International Inc. 2011). We applied factor analysis to explore and confirm the factor structure of the measure for women's empowerment separately in the five countries. We then applied multi-group confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test for invariance in item intercepts, loadings, and residuals across countries to evaluate the reasonableness of cross-country comparisons of women's empowerment. Our findings offer important practical insights for cross-national comparisons and monitoring of women's empowerment in lower-income countries.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Conceptualizing women's empowerment

Women's empowerment is *multi-dimensional* (Kabeer, 1999; Agarwala & Lynch, 2006; Yount et al., 2016) and *relational*

(Cornwall, 2016; Eger, Miller, & Scarles, 2018; Kabeer, 2011). Scholars conceptualize multiple dimensions of women's empowerment. These dimensions include *resources for empowerment*, *agency* or the ability to make choices, including in relation to one's gendered attitudes and beliefs, *achievements* in the political, economic, social and cultural realms, and the *intergenerational transmission* of resources and opportunities (Kabeer, 1999; Kishor, 2000; Moghadam & Senftova, 2005). Women's empowerment is contingent on social transformation across these interrelated domains (Kabeer, 2005). Women's empowerment is an individual and a collective process (Eger et al., 2018; Kabeer, 2011). Empowerment involves claims on new resources, as well as control over beliefs, values and attitudes (Cornwall, 2016). In this theory-based measurement validation of women's empowerment measures, we draw on the interdisciplinary body of development theory on women's empowerment, and focus on three interrelated domains of women's empowerment measured in the DHS. We include (1) access to assets and enabling resources, (2) ability to exercise choice in the household (instrumental agency, or power to) and (3) the expression of equitable gender beliefs and attitudes (intrinsic agency, or power within) (Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 1999; Kishor, 2000).

#### 2.1.1. Enabling resources

Enabling resources are the preconditions of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). Positive economic, social, and human resources and conditions can enhance women's potential to exercise instrumental agency (Kishor, 2000). Women's schooling attainment, acquisition of economic resources and later age at pivotal life events predict greater instrumental and intrinsic agency and well-being (Kabeer, 1999; Yount, Crandall, & Cheong, 2018). Schooling enhances women's cognitive abilities (Kabeer, 2005), which, in turn, is associated with greater well-being among women and children (Carlson et al., 2015; Pratley, 2016; Rieger & Trommlerová, 2016; Yount, Dijkerman, Zureick-Brown, & VanderEnde, 2014). In Bangladesh, when women gain greater schooling attainment than the community average, they are less likely to justify wife beating (Krause, Haardörfer, & Yount, 2016). Women's greater autonomy in household decision making is associated with spousal schooling attainment differences that favor women, and wife's control over husband's income (Upadhyay & Hindin, 2005). Access to self-employment and wage labor enhance women's ability to exercise instrumental agency (Head, Yount, Hennink, & Sterk, 2015; Kabeer, 2005; Salem, Cheong, & Yount, 2017). Women's participation in credit programs, as an opportunity for economic agency, is associated with greater contraceptive use (Schuler, Hashemi, & Riley, 1997). Conditions at first marriage, such as women's age, are social resources that enable young women to gain access to other premarital human, economic and social resources (Yount et al., 2014), and shift normative attitudes. Women who first married after age 18 have been less likely to justify wife-beating in India (Santhya, Ram, Acharya, Jejeebhoy, Ram, Singh, 2010) and have had higher short-term post-marital agency and long term post-marital economic empowerment in Egypt (Crandall, VanderEnde, Cheong, Dodell, & Yount, 2016; Yount, Crandall, & Cheong, 2018). Premarital enabling resources can ensure post-marital agency (Crandall et al., 2016; Yount et al., 2014) and women's ability to negotiate rights and physical safety within marriage (Miedema, et al., 2016; Yount, 2005).

#### 2.1.2. Intrinsic and instrumental agency

Agency is a women's ability to make choices pertaining to her life, under conditions when choice exists (Kabeer, 1999, 2005). Women's agency is a multidimensional construct. Agency can be instrumental or intrinsic. Instrumental agency often is measured as women's ability to make household and family-level decisions

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