

Measuring women's empowerment in India should be given a higher priority

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Issues Brief

Background

Assigning a high priority to improving the wellbeing of women is now commonplace in policymaking circles across south Asia, particularly India. The Indian constitution enshrines the notion of equality across gender, but opportunity and practice do not always reflect those ambitions. Repeated reports about the poor status of women accompanied by evidence that enhanced empowerment of women can lead to a range of positive social and economic developments¹ has motivated specific legislation aimed at improving the status of women.



National legislators have been especially busy in the last decade. Sexual harassment in the workplace has been outlawed, laws that prohibit violence against women have been strengthened and maternity benefits improved. Nonetheless, questions remain about the empowerment of women especially in those parts of the economy and society where traditions are more steadfast.

- Empowerment of women remains a high priority in policy circles and there are sound economic and social reasons for this.
- In agriculture, women contribute significantly but have very little ownership or control of assets.
- Even though governments claim to be promoting empowerment, the data for tracing change is not readily available.
- Some household-level data have serious limitations and can disguise important nuances. For instance, a household that is above the poverty line will often have women and children who are still below the poverty line.
- Assigning resources to better measure changes in empowerment will improve the targeting of interventions.

The first national policy for the empowerment of women² was introduced in India 20 years ago and the proposed update in 2016³ sounded specific warnings around the alternative trajectories emerging for women.

On the one hand, changing technologies and growing acknowledgment of gender rights has opened new employment opportunities for women and on the other hand, large numbers of women remain in low paid or unpaid positions.

Agriculture specifics

This is especially the case in agriculture, where women's labor has become increasingly prominent while their claim on other assets, like land, remain weak. In 2018 the National Council of Applied Economic Research found that women comprise over 42 per cent of the agricultural labor force in India, however they owned less than two per cent of the nation's farmland.



Whilst these types of statistics are a stark reminder of the long journey ahead to achieve equality, the data themselves also signal a major deficiency in the empowerment of women.

Whilst “women's empowerment” has been a clear policy for two decades, there is little national data of sufficient granularity to measure change. Identifying this limitation emerged from efforts related to an ACIAR project (LWR/2018/04) that sought to better understand how policies and institutions collectively influence outcomes for smallholders in the East Gangetic Plain.

Data gaps

In the agriculture sector in India, production data is recorded at the household level at best, with little discrimination between the contributions of men and women. The Commission on Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) collects data on labor hours spent by women and men in the cultivation of 23 principal crops separately, but the gender disaggregated data are not publicly available.

Women's contribution to post-harvest storage and processing of grains goes completely unmeasured. Women's contribution to high-value agriculture (fruits, vegetables, and livestock products) that account for two-thirds of the total value of agricultural output in India are also not systematically measured.

Similarly, household income data fail to capture the claims of women over income or their decision-making power in other domains. A recent study using the International Food Policy Research Institute's Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey⁴ data shows that women and children face significant probabilities of living in poverty even in households with per-capita expenditure above the poverty line. In contrast, men living in poor households are not necessarily themselves poor. Similar findings may apply in India, but it is hard to be definitive without data¹.

The gender neutrality of the current data systems in India stands in contrast to the well-developed academic literature on measuring and ascribing empowerment. National gender budgeting⁵ has been mainstreamed for some time, in recognition that women are impacted by many policies differently to men, but this falls short of understanding nuanced shifts in empowerment.

A way forward

Amongst the more robust measures is the acclaimed Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index⁶ (WEAI). The WEAI has been used across multiple regions and provides a standardized measure to directly gauge changes in empowerment and inclusion in agriculture. Of course, there are limits to any index, including the WEAI, but given the growing feminisation of the agricultural sector across much of South Asia, deploying a measure of empowerment at a national level should be a priority. This was recognized five years ago in the draft update of the National Policy for Women, but progress has stalled.

The female labor force participation in wage work (LFPR) in India is falling from already very low levels. The drivers of this worrisome trend are not very well understood. Dropping out of the labor force is a matter of choice for some women and a compulsion for many others who face time constraints, mobility restrictions, and shrinking opportunities for gainful employment in an economy that is slowing down.

Recommendations

Irrespective of the reasons for the falling LFPR of women, it is widely understood that a lot of (unpaid) work that women do is not measured in the GDP accounting. Carrying out periodic time-use surveys for women, men, and children (boys and girls) should be a priority. Time-use surveys will help us get a better sense of women's and girl's contribution to family welfare and understand how modern technologies (like mechanization of agriculture) affect different members of the household.

In the absence of these types of data, policymakers continue to rely on stylized facts⁷ around the role of women in agriculture.



Given the magnitude of government expenditures directed at the sector, there remains substantial scope for improvement. Coupled with the well-known disproportionate impacts of COVID on women⁸, the case for strengthening the data used to track women's empowerment in India is now even stronger.

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¹ Other lessons for India might also be drawn from neighboring Nepal where a more inclusive definition of what constitutes work is employed and alternative design and sampling are used to better account for women's employment in agriculture (Sen et al., 2019).