



POLICY BRIEF No. 48

Indicators for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women: from concept to practice

Nowadays, there is a great interest in incorporating gender into agricultural development projects. However, its incorporation does not ensure the reduction of inequalities, because the theoretical concepts of gender, empowerment, and equality are not always defined or articulated with their implementation in practice.

The lack of articulation between the concept of gender and its application in different projects results in a formulation and implementation that are weak in terms of operationalization (1), making it difficult to: capture the full range of dimensions considered by empowerment and gender equality; design and implement actions in favor of women; reduce the inequalities between men and women; and contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal number 5 “Gender Equality”.

The lack of guidelines on how to connect the concepts of gender equality and/or women’s empowerment with practice unveils the need to know what indicators to use or adapt (and how to adapt them) to measure the concepts related to gender.

KEY MESSAGES



Many projects propose understanding empowerment or actually empowering women, but in their implementation (i.e., through their methodology, theoretical concepts, and the practical implementation of such concepts) they end up obtaining results that reach or benefit women, but do not empower them.



Development projects focused on analyzing empowerment or improving the empowerment level of women should consider having their theoretical framework, actions, and results aligned for the efficient design and implementation of strategies to improve the living conditions of women in the agricultural sector.



There are some tools that measure the concept of women’s empowerment: WEAI (Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index), WELI (Women’s Empowerment in Livestock Index), and WPEI (Women’s Political Empowerment Index). While their applications in Latin America have been scarce, they may be used to diagnose and prioritize intervention actions. Furthermore, it is necessary to adapt them to the changing and complex socio-cultural context of the region.



This is why, through a systematic review of literature, in this study, we seek to show evidence of the ways in which the concepts of gender have been operationalized by agricultural development projects in Latin America, with the purpose of approaching the discussion on the need of methodological guidelines to apply gender analysis.

Results

Most of the 87 selected articles are concentrated in Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador, and Honduras, and they have been published between the years 1982 and 2019, with a rise in the number of articles from 2010 onwards. On the other hand, the projects use mainly qualitative methodologies (56 articles), followed by quantitative analyses (18) and mixed methods (13). Regarding methods, documentary literature review is the most widely used technique in qualitative analyses, while surveys are preferred by quantitative and mixed-methods approaches. The last two also use interviews to support the explanation of their results.

Regarding the theoretical frameworks included in the articles, the concepts of gender and empowerment are the most widely used and there is a general consensus in their definitions. For the former, all articles agree that

gender is a set of standards, roles, and behaviors that a certain society confers to men and women.

For the latter, most projects refer to it using the definition of Kabeer (1999), who defines empowerment as a “process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability”.

Regarding this concept, there are discrepancies between the theoretical frameworks used and the results presented. Many of the projects reviewed are based on the concept of empowerment, but their results are framed in terms of reaching or benefiting women and not necessarily empowering them (Johnson et al., 2018). For example, when they refer to reaching

women, the results focus on the increase of women's participation in different spaces. Benefiting refers to increasing their incomes, generating jobs, or reducing the working hours of women.

Finally, when referring to empowerment, emphasis is made on transforming gender norms and support women to be able to make strategic decisions regarding their own lives. In this sense, reaching and benefiting helps reducing the gender gaps by reducing the inequalities between men and women and their articulation could contribute to empowerment, since this is a process that requires development over time.

While gender is a cross-cutting issue in reaching, benefiting, or empowering women, the narratives in the articles reviewed rarely achieve the mainstreaming of gender. An example of this are the projects that referring to work and income, highlight the need to offer employment to women, so they can generate an income, ignoring that sometimes this idea of benefiting women translates into disempowerment, either because of the heavy workloads or because the income is not controlled by them.

Approaches to operationalizing women's empowerment

Some tools to operationalize the concept of women's empowerment in the agricultural sector have been developed in recent years. On the one hand, Alkire et al. (2013) developed the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), and on the other, Galiè et al. (2019), based on WEAI, developed the Women's Empowerment in Livestock Index (WELI). Both indexes are comprised by a set of gender indicators that achieve the mainstreaming of reaching, benefiting, and empowering women to a large extent. A clear example of this can be seen in the credit indicators, which are developed taking into account the possibility of women's participation in (reach), access to (benefit), and decision-making on financial capitals (empowerment).

While these indexes are aligned with the agency dimension of the definition of empowerment proposed by Kabeer (1999), they still have some limitations to incorporate the resources and achievements dimensions, thereby evidencing the need for improvement. WEAI and WELI have also been criticized, because they do not include aspects, such as sexual and reproductive health rights, or the aspirations of women, and also because their unit of analysis are the individuals identified as the key decision makers within the household, which is not representative for all women within the household (Hanmery Klugman, 2016).

Another tool developed from a macro perspective is the Women's Political Empowerment Index (WPEI). This index approaches empowerment from a structural perspective, emphasizing public policies, civil liberties, freedom of social participation, and political engagement (Sundström et al., 2017). It stands out mainly due to the freedom of social participation, measuring the access of women to public discussion, their participation in organizations, and the possibility of being influential.



In the review carried out, these indexes were found to be the best in operationalizing the concept of empowerment. Nevertheless, these three examples do not represent all the aspects addressed by agricultural development projects, nor have they been widely tested and applied in Latin America. Therefore, they are not standard tools to be replicated without taking into account the changing and complex socio-cultural context of the region. A review and adaptation of such tools is needed to guide decision makers and program implementers regarding the incorporation of actions targeting women's empowerment.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the fact that nowadays development projects are required to include a gender analysis, its inclusion should not be seen as a requirement, but as the possibility to improve women's living conditions.

The gender perspective may be a major incentive for the development of Latin American agriculture through the discovery and promotion of the role played by women within this sector.

At this point, it is imperative to recognize the different scales of the effects generated by an intervention, as they may reach, benefit, or empower women. .

Reaching and benefiting are related to the idea of reducing gender gaps or inequalities, while empowering entails the transformation of the social standards that shape the capacities and abilities of women to make strategic decisions about their lives.



The fact that projects base their theoretical framework on the concept of empowerment, but present their results in terms of their reach or benefit, represents a problem with its roots in the absence of methodological guidelines that allow for an operationalization of the concept that involves not just defining a line of action for interventions, but also avoiding potential discrepancies between the objectives and results of development projects.

Realizing the importance of an operationalization aligned with the theories and specific objectives of each project will allow for the measurement of indicators to be seen not just with the intention of closing gender gaps, but also to enable changes and growth in the lives of women over time. However, achieving this requires a clear definition of the impacts the project will have, which shall not necessarily promise to empower women, since reaching or benefiting them are also important elements to accomplish gender equality, making it possible to set attainable targets to contribute to the development of a scenario that enables empowerment in the future.

Here are some recommendations to set these targets and in general to define the scope of interventions:

1. Using the baseline to understand gender inequalities and any intersectionality issue within the scope of the project, either directly related to the main results of the project or with aspects that could affect them.
2. Clearly set project objectives related to gender and how are they connected with the underlying concepts of gender.
3. Explicitly define how meeting the objectives will contribute to reduce gender inequalities, what and how will they help to empower women.
4. Develop indicators to help monitor and evaluate the achievements of the project related to gender and use them to adapt project activities as needed, during its implementation.

In conclusion, it is important for development projects to clearly define the scope of their interventions, setting objectives to reach, benefit, or empower women, as the case may be, which should help to add continuity to the processes contributing to the gender-based structural transformation. This delimitation will allow for the selection of the most relevant gender indicators, according to the target set, and so a better monitoring and evaluation system. To measure empowerment in particular, there are tools that can be adapted and implemented in Latin America to guide the design and implementation of strategies and policies to promote structural, social, and cultural transformations.

References

- Alkire S; Meinzen-Dick R; Peterman A; Quisumbing A; Seymour G; Vaz A. (2013). The women's empowerment in agriculture index. *World Development*, 52:71–91.
- Galiè A; Teufel N; Korir L; Baltenweck I; Girard AW; Dominguez-Salas P; Yount KM. (2019). The women's empowerment in livestock index. *Social Indicators Research*, 142(2):799–825.
- Hanmer L; Klugman J. 2016. Exploring Women's Agency and Empowerment in Developing Countries: Where do we Stand? *Feminist Economics* 22(1):237–263.
- Johnson N; Balagamwala M; Pinkstaff C; Theis S; Meinzen-Dick R; Quisumbing A. (2018). How do agricultural development projects empower women? Linking strategies with expected outcomes. *Journal of Gender, Agriculture and Food Security*, 3(2):1–19.
- Kabeer N. (1999). Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30:435–464.
- Sundström A; Paxton P; Wang YT; Lindberg SI. (2017). Women's political empowerment: A new global index, 1900–2012. *World Development*, 94:321–335.

Correct citation

Chavarro MJ; Moreno M; Muriel J; Twyman J. 2020. Indicators for gender equality and the empowerment of women: from concept to practice. Policy Brief No. 48. International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Cali, Colombia. 6 p.

Available also in Spanish as: "Indicadores de género y empoderamiento de la mujer en la agricultura: del concepto a la práctica."

Read the full working paper: "Indicators for gender equality and the empowerment of women: from concept to practice."

.....

Endnote

- [1] It is understood as a process that enables the disaggregation of the theoretical concept guiding the research (on gender and empowerment in this paper), while identifying empirical evidence (variables) that will help recognizing it in reality.

About the authors

Mónica Juliana Chavarro, Visiting Researcher at the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT in Cali, Colombia.

✉ mjchavarro@gmail.com

Manuel Moreno, Research Assistant at the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT in Cali, Colombia.

✉ manuel.moreno@cgiar.org

Juliana Muriel, Research Associate at the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT in Cali, Colombia.

✉ j.muriel@cgiar.org

Jennifer Twyman, Visiting Researcher Specialist in Gender at the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT in Cali, Colombia.

✉ jentwyman@gmail.com

Alliance



RESEARCH
PROGRAM ON
Policies,
Institutions,
and Markets

Led by IFPRI