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Project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture
Results from Cognitive Testing in Myanmar

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Abstract

When designing and evaluating policies and projects for women's empowerment, appropriate indicators are needed. This paper reports on the lessons learned from two rounds of pretesting and cognitive testing of the project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI) in a total of five States/Regions in Myanmar. We assess if respondents understand the modules as intended and which questions require modification based on the cultural context. We find that the questions also present in the abbreviated WEAI are generally well understood, particularly on instrumental and group agency. The challenge to respond to hypothetical and abstract questions did become apparent in the domains representing intrinsic agency, and was problematic for questions on autonomy and self-efficacy. Also, the internationally validated questions on attitudes towards domestic violence were too abstract, and responses depend on the scenario envisioned. We also suggest including an adapted version of the module on speaking up in public, to reinforce the domain on collective agency. Our findings provide an encouraging message to those aspiring to use pro-WEAI, but emphasize the need for continued attention for context-specific adjustments and critical testing of even those instruments that are widely used and deemed validated.

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1. Introduction

Women's empowerment is high on the agenda of policy makers, non-government organizations and other gender equality advocates. Yet, conceptualizing and measuring empowerment is a challenge. Many researchers have undertaken the quest to develop empowerment indicators that fit different cultures and regions, yet there is no guarantee that indicators cross-validated in a certain number of cultural contexts are equally valid in yet other countries and contexts (Akter et al., 2017; Lambrecht and Mahrt, 2019). How to conceptualize and translate empowerment into meaningful questions to men and women across the world is strongly dependent on the context they live in.

The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) is an innovative tool that measures women's empowerment in agriculture (Alkire et al. 2013). This measurement tool helps diagnose areas of disempowerment and design development programs to address those areas. By now, different versions of the WEAI have been developed, and all of them were piloted or tested. Due to time and funding constraints though, this was typically done in a limited number of geographical locations. Southeast Asia, for example, was largely left out, with only the Philippines being a pilot country for the recent WEAI for value chains (WEAI4VC) (Malapit et al. 2020).

Qualitative research on women's empowerment in four countries in Southeast Asia indeed finds that conventional narratives of gender inequality might not hold true in this region (Akter et al., 2017). Moreover, intra-regional heterogeneity is observed, further emphasizing the need for context-specific gender measurement and intervention frameworks. *"Even when using well-established and validated questions and survey instruments, it is still worthwhile to conduct cognitive testing when using the tools in a new context or country, to ensure that respondents understand the intent of the questions"* (Malapit et al., 2017, p. 1). Thus, validation and revision of tools commonly used elsewhere is recommended (Akter et al., 2017; Lambrecht and Mahrt, 2019).

In preparation for intra-household data collection in Myanmar, we pretested and cognitively tested the project-level WEAI (pro-WEAI) with respondents from different States/Regions and ethnic groups. Compared to other countries, very little data is available from Myanmar. Due to decades of military rule and oppression, Myanmar has largely been deprived of research, including research on gender. With more openness towards change and policymakers seeking options to improve the welfare of the people, it is imperative they are supported by the right data and advice to support their decisions. Adequate indicators should support them in this effort. Cognitive testing of the pro-WEAI questions with diverse ethnic groups in the country is expected to offer suggestions for improvement of the indicator and further the

understanding of quantitative results from this indicator. Findings from this exercise will also provide useful feedback to others seeking to do research on women's empowerment in Southeast Asia, as well for those continuing to search for internationally standardized ways of quantifying women's empowerment.

2. WEAI

The WEAI is an innovative tool that measures women's empowerment in agriculture (Alkire et al. 2013). By now, different versions of WEAI have been developed: WEAI, Abbreviated WEAI (A-WEAI), Project-level WEAI (pro-WEAI) and WEAI for value chains (WEAI4VC). Work on the WEAI started late 2010 and the first indicator was launched in 2012. In response to the need for an instrument that is shorter and less time-intensive to administer, and applying lessons learned from applying the WEAI, the A-WEAI was developed. Later, the pro-WEAI expanded on the WEAI to better measure women's empowerment in various types of agricultural development projects. A pilot version of the pro-WEAI was launched in 2018 (Malapit et al. 2019). Finally, the WEAI4VC adapts the pro-WEAI to measure aspects of empowerment relevant to value chains (Malapit et al., 2020).

Kabeer's seminal definition of empowerment lies at the basis of the WEAI and the pro-WEAI (1999). Kabeer defined empowerment as the ability to exercise strategic choice, which encompasses three dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. For conceptual and practical reasons, the WEAI and the A-WEAI focus mostly on 'agency'. The WEAI captures ten indicators in five domains of decision making: production, productive resources, income, leadership, and time use (Alkire et al. 2013). The pro-WEAI builds on the WEAI, but more explicitly links to the empowerment theory. In doing so, it takes into account critical assessment of other researchers, such as O'Hara and Clement (2018). It set out to not only link to Kabeer's definition (1999), but also to the conceptualization of different types of power (Rowlands, 1995; Malapit et al. 2019). It reflects on three domains - intrinsic agency (power within), instrumental agency (power to), and collective agency (power with) – using a total of 12 indicators. It is the pro-WEAI that will constitute the basis of the cognitive testing exercise described in this paper.

The WEAI and its variations can be used as an aggregate index but can also be disaggregated in sub-indices (Yount et al. 2019). This hugely increases the potential for understanding pathways to empowerment and design development programs to address those areas. Moreover, the indicator uses data from both male and female respondents, allowing for direct comparisons in overall levels of empowerment and the domains contributing to men's and women's disempowerment (Malapit et al. 2019).

Each version of the WEAI has been piloted, cognitively tested or qualitatively assessed to at least a minimum extent. Work on the original WEAI started late 2010 and a first pilot survey was administered in 2011 in Bangladesh, Guatemala and Uganda. Results were refined based on qualitative interviews and case studies, as well as further expert consultations (Alkire et al. 2013). Johnson and Diego-Rosell (2015) evaluated the cognitive validity of the WEAI in Haiti, instilling confidence that questions are generally well-understood though with a few areas of concern. Malapit et al. (2017) undertook cognitive interviews in Bangladesh and Uganda to refine the WEAI, and the potential problems identified were used to inform the design of the A-WEAI.

The pro-WEAI is strongly informed by qualitative research. Malapit et al. (2019) worked with a portfolio of 13 agricultural development projects in nine different countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia to develop the pro-WEAI: Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Mali, Tanzania, Bangladesh and Nepal. Yount et al. (2019) analyzed pro-WEAI data from Bangladesh and Burkina Faso to assess the measurement properties of the pro-WEAI. They emphasize the strengths of the pro-WEAI, but also suggest a shorter version of the pro-WEAI can be developed that will improve its measurement properties and call for better indicators representing collective agency. Hannan et al. (2020) use cognitive interviewing for the pro-WEAI's intrahousehold relationships module and an additional health and nutrition module in two regions in Bangladesh. While overall respondent's understanding of questions was good, they propose several modifications to avoid misinterpretations of questions and further improve response accuracy. Overall, the authors recommend applying cognitive interviewing as a standard approach in questionnaire development.

While the WEAI has been applied around the world, including Southeast Asia, none of the piloting or testing of the WEAI, A-WEAI or pro-WEAI was done in Southeast Asia. Only recently, the WEAI4VC was pretested in the Philippines (Malapit et al. 2020). Akter et al. (2017) used the original WEAI framework in focus group discussions in four Southeast Asian countries: Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines. Some of their findings contradict the conventional narratives of gender inequity in agriculture. Yet, they also find substantial heterogeneity among those four countries and caution against extrapolating findings or frameworks from a specific geographical area into global policy guidelines. Except from the recent study by Ragasa et al. (2020), no quantitative data is published for Myanmar using the full version of the WEAI, A-WEAI, pro-WEAI or WEAI4VC.

3. Women's empowerment in Myanmar

Myanmar was under a dictatorship for several decades and only recently shifted to a more democratic governance system with a larger international openness. It is the second largest country in Southeast Asia and covers a diversity of agro-ecologies (coast, delta, dry zone, and hills and mountains). Its population estimated at about 55 million people, who come from different religions and from an estimated 135 different ethnic groups. Literature on gender in Myanmar is scarce, but the existing literature is divided between those admiring its gender equitable nature (Khaing 1984, Winterberger 2017) versus those pointing out stark gender inequalities in households and families (Faxon, 2015; Miedema et al. 2016) or communities and politics (GEN, 2015).

As in most countries around the world, men in Myanmar take a leading role in agriculture (Akter et al. 2016, Lambrecht and Mahrt 2019). Women are often considered as agricultural workers or helpers rather than farmers (Faxon, 2017). Yet, women's opinions matter, and husband and wife often make decisions jointly (Akter et al. 2016, Lambrecht and Mahrt 2019).

Women in Myanmar often earn income and are active participants in the labour market. The 2015-2016 Demographic Health Survey finds that three quarters of currently married women were employed in the 12 months prior to the survey (Ministry of Health and Sports - MoHS/Myanmar and ICF, 2017). Yet, both men and women are encouraged to pursue occupations that are regarded as suitable to their gender, and there is a significant gender gap in wages, pointing at a lesser valuation of women's work compared to men's work (GEN, 2015). Married and employed women mainly decide either independently (51%) or jointly with their husband (41%) on how to use their earnings (Ministry of Health and Sports - MoHS/Myanmar and ICF, 2017).

In addition to deciding on their own income, women in Myanmar are generally the guardians of the household income (Akter et al. 2016, GEN 2015, Winterberger 2017). Day-to-day household management decisions are commonly made by the wife alone, and it is often claimed that women have greater control over household income and decisions compared to their husbands (Akter et al. 2016, Spiro, 1977, Winterberger 2017). For matters outside the household though, men are considered the household head and will represent the household in legal affairs (GEN 2015, Lambrecht and Mahrt 2019).

Land in Myanmar is typically registered in the husband's name. Nevertheless, in many areas of the country, decisions about asset transfers are made jointly by husband and wife. Where inheritance rules are not discriminating against women, women perceive themselves as having equal access to productive

resources such as land and inputs (Akter et al. 2016; Lambrecht and Mahrt 2020). Yet, more overt gender-discriminatory practices in inheritance are observed among ethnic groups with patrilineal customary norms, for example in Chin or Kachin (Boutry et al. 2018; Faxon et al., 2015, GEN 2015).

In stark contrast to the relatively positive picture above, domestic violence is widely prevalent as well as deemed acceptable in Myanmar. In 2015/2016, nine percent of women aged 15-49 years old had experienced physical violence in the past 12 months, and fifteen percent of women had experienced physical violence since age 15 (Ministry of Health and Sports - MoHS/Myanmar and ICF, 2017). Moreover, nearly half of all men and women believed that a husband is justified in beating his wife in at least one of five specified situations (Ministry of Health and Sports - MoHS/Myanmar and ICF, 2017).

Beyond the household sphere, women have limited influence compared to men (Spiro, 1977). Women are rarely active in agricultural groups and have only a minimal influence on community-level decision making (Akter et al. 2016, GEN 2015). Due to the perception that women's rights are not a problem in Myanmar, women's leadership is not deemed critical and gender is often ignored in policy making (GEN 2015).

4. Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative methods can be applied to assess the appropriateness and validity of suggested indicators. Cognitive testing is an evidence-based, qualitative method for assessing whether survey questions are being understood by respondents in the way they were originally intended, and whether the question is generating the information that its author intends. The method systematically identifies and corrects problems with survey questions in order to ultimately improve the quality of accuracy of the survey instruments (Willis 2005; Beatty & Willis 2007).

The approach has been used for many topics, including measurement of women's empowerment. It was successfully used in Bangladesh and Uganda in 2014 to inform what ultimately became the A-WEAI (Malapit et al 2017). If done before the actual roll-out of a survey instrument, the results from cognitive interviewing can aid in improving the survey instrument (Malapit et al. 2017). It is also used retrospectively, to better understand quantitative results. In the Myanmar context, extensive cognitive testing is recommended due to potentially divergent patterns compared to other countries globally, and its diversity of languages and cultures locally.

4.1 First pretest and cognitive testing

A first small-scale pretest (pretest I) and cognitive testing (cognitive test I) of pro-WEAI was done in Burmese language in October 2019 in preparation for a study in the Sagaing Region in Myanmar (table 1 and table A.1). The full pro-WEAI questionnaire was tested with 13 female and 6 male respondents. In addition, cognitive testing was done with 4 female and 4 male respondents on the modules designed to capture autonomy in income, attitudes about intimate partner violence against women, respect among household members, and community influence and speaking in public. The questionnaires for the pretest and cognitive testing were translated into Burmese, the official language of the country and the mother tongue of the respondents of the communities for pretest I, and verified by all enumerators prior to the field work.

Table 1: Overview of domains pretested and cognitively tested

Pro-WEAI domain	Indicator	Pretest I	Cognitive test I	Pretest II	Cognitive test II	Recommendation
<i>Intrinsic Agency</i>						
1	Autonomy in income	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Drop
2	Self-efficacy	Yes	No	Yes (3 questions)	Yes	Drop
3	Attitudes about intimate partner violence against women	Yes	Yes	Yes (more scenarios)	Yes	Minor modification
4	Respect among household members	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Minor modification
<i>Instrumental Agency</i>						
5	Input in productive decisions	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Keep
6	Ownership of land and other assets	Yes	No	Yes	Yes (land only)	Keep
7	Access to and decisions on financial services	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Keep
8	Control over use of income	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Minor modification
9	Work balance	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Keep
10	Visiting important locations	No	No	Yes	Yes	Minor modification
<i>Collective Agency</i>						

11	Group membership	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Minor modification
12	Membership in influential groups	yes	No	Yes	Yes	Minor modification
former WEAI	Community influence and speaking in public	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Major modification

The first pretest took place in the presence of all but one author. Due to the small scale of the exercise, data were not entered into data analysis software. Analysis from the first pretesting results was mainly based on the debriefing with the field teams regarding key impressions by section, examination of field notes and responses to the cognitive interview questions.

4.2 Second pretest and cognitive testing

Further cognitive testing was done at a larger scale in January 2020 (table 1). When sampling for cognitive testing, the goal is to maximize variance among the respondent group by interviewing a variety of individuals who will be useful in informing decisions about if and how to modify questions (Willis 2005). Cognitive pretesting guidelines recommend a sample size of 10-15 respondents per language group (Johnson & Rosell, 2015). The choice of the sample for cognitive testing was determined by the focus area for the foreseen household survey which was in six different States/Regions of Myanmar: Ayeyarwady, Magway, Mandalay and Sagaing Region, and Shan and Kachin State. Ayeyarwady, Magway, Mandalay and Sagaing are mainly populated by people of Burmese ethnicity speaking Burmese as mother tongue, whereas Shan and Kachin State are ethnographically and linguistically diverse.

We focused on 2 different languages in each State and 15 interviews per language, while ensuring an adequate mix of men and women in dual-adult households as well as women in female-only households. The total sample consisted of 56 women and 31 men in rural households in four different States/Regions and five different languages (table 2).¹ All male respondents and 26 female respondents belonged to a male-headed household, while 30 female respondents lived in a female-headed household.

¹ The sample was slightly smaller than planned for Burmese speaking respondents as one of the trained enumerators could not join to the field due to a family emergency. It was also less balanced among different languages than planned in Kachin State as respondents often speak multiple languages fluently and enumerators could not make a right assessment beforehand of the preferred language of interview for the respondents. Finally, there is no perfect correlation between the language of interview and ethnicity of the respondent.

Table 2: Sample for 2nd cognitive testing exercise, by gender and language

	Male respondent	Female respondent
Burmese	12	17
Shan	5	10
Pa'O	5	9
Jing Hpaw	9	17
Lhao Vo	0	3
Total	31	56

The pro-WEAI questionnaire was updated and translated in Burmese. Enumerators were trained during a period of four days, including one day of pretesting near the training facility. Enumerators conducted the interviews using a paper-based questionnaire. After the interview was completed, data was entered digitally and responses to open-ended questions were translated to English. Using Stata software, summary statistics were calculated for all quantitative pro-WEAI variables and where relevant we looked at correlations between answers to different questions. We checked whether respondents identified difficulties in cognitive interview questions, and examined open ended responses for comprehension, retrieval, judgement and response. We also held a debriefing with the field teams and studied the field notes.

5. Results

Below we describe the main qualitative and quantitative results emerging from the cognitive and pretesting exercises. Findings are organized according to the three types of agency included in the pro-WEAI. We end with a note on the observed diversity across different geographies and languages.

5.1 Intrinsic agency

Intrinsic agency is challenging to measure. Hence, indicators for intrinsic agency have featured less prominently in measurement and analysis of women's empowerment as compared to indicators related to instrumental agency (Malapit et al. 2019, Yount et al. 2019). The proWEAI includes four domains for intrinsic agency: autonomy in income, self-efficacy, attitudes about intimate partner violence against women, and respect among household members. None of these domains are part of the original or abbreviated WEAI.

The abstract nature of the questions in these modules was particularly challenging to the respondents. Respondents would often find options where different answers could apply to the same question and found it challenging to decide which answer should dominate. This was least so for the module on respect among household members.

Autonomy in income. The first pretest demonstrated confusion between different scenarios. Yet, even after adjusting the language prior to the second pretest, cognitive testing responses showed that more than half of all respondents misunderstood the meaning of the stories. Moreover, generalization of the question was challenging to respondents. They would easily come up with different examples to demonstrate they might fit in several if not all scenarios. We recommended to drop this module given it created too much confusion among respondents.

Self-efficacy. These questions are very abstract and difficult to respond to. Already during enumerator training, we were not able to clarify exactly what each question meant to the enumerators, nor among the trainers. Respondents found these questions difficult to answer and were frustrated over the repetitive nature. Already, following the challenges observed during pretest I, we decided to reduce the eight self-efficacy questions to three questions that were most distinct.

All statements in the self-efficacy module require strong generalizations. Respondents would be confused and answer “there’s nobody like me”, “I don’t make those kinds of comparisons”, or request additional clarification. Cognitive testing results showed that respondents continued to incorrectly describe some of the statements. During several pretest interviews (both in pretest I and II) we observed the following scenario: Respondents were confused by the question and asked the enumerator to further explain the statement. As this was often still not satisfactory to the respondent, s/he narrated an example or story from his/her life which related to the question. The respondent then asked the enumerator to choose the right answer based on the story they had told. The enumerator consequently selected the answer in this and in following questions to avoid annoying the respondent with a very similar question.

While the self-efficacy scale has been demonstrated to work well in other countries (Chen et al. 2001), we do not recommend using this scale in the Myanmar context and testing these questions in prior to applying them in other contexts where this has not yet been rigorously tested.

Attitudes about intimate partner violence against women. Two main issues arose in the module on attitudes about intimate partner violence: translation and challenges to generalize responses. First, translation was challenging in multiple aspects. Already, the team had lengthy discussions on how to translate ‘justified’ into multiple languages. Since a Burmese translation of ‘justified’ sounds stiff and more narrowly refers to a legal framework, we settled on using ‘fair’. This is the same wording as used in the Myanmar DHS (Ministry of Health and Sports - MoHS/Myanmar and ICF, 2017). Nevertheless, a subsequent translation of ‘fair’ was not always available in other ethnic languages. Hence, despite having

used a Burmese-language version for the interviews, enumerators in other languages will have used wording with slightly different meanings.

Moreover, the exact way the question was asked and the answer options provided matters. The greatest care was needed to make sure respondents understood and responded to the full question, rather than a subcomponent of the question. For example, some considered the question “Is it fair for a wife to go out without telling her husband?” rather than “Is it fair for a husband to hit his wife if she goes out without telling him?”.

Second, respondents found it difficult or even impossible to respond either yes or no to the questions without further clarifications of the exact circumstances the question referred to. Mostly, the respondents during pretest I wanted to know the intentions behind certain actions, and whether the intentions were good or bad. Some respondents would ask for clarifications as to why a woman would neglect the children, burn the food, go out without telling him, etc. Other respondents would try to respond to the question by specifying two opposing scenarios, one where s/he would respond yes and another one where s/he would respond no. The enumerator was then left to choose either yes or no.

The cognitive testing and second pretest therefore focused on differences in responses depending on the specific reasons why a certain situation occurred. We assessed this quantitatively by giving a series of more specific scenarios compared to how this module is generally administered in pro-WEAI and DHS (table 4). Moreover, we explicitly asked the respondents whether wife beating might be fair would depend on the circumstances in the cognitive testing component.

As expected, we find large differences in the attitudes towards partner violence depending on the specific scenario and depending on whether the wife is considered being at fault (table 3). A respondent in Ayeyarwady mentioned “*a husband should not beat his wife if she does the right thing.*” An enumerator in Ayeyarwady Region noted “*The respondent answered that the word "fair" means "beating when a wife does the wrong thing" (AYA_HH_03_02).* Indeed, only two percent of female respondents think it is fair for a husband to beat his wife if she burns food because she was busy with the children. Yet, if she burned the food because she was busy on social media, 65 percent of the female respondents think wife beating is fair. Our cognitive interview questions confirmed this trend. They showed that two thirds of male respondents (65%) and over half of female respondents (56%) agreed that the acceptability of wife beating depends on the circumstances. None of them responds wife beating is fair if the husband is at fault.

Table 3. Attitudes about intimate partner violence against women (pretest II)

	Men (% Yes)	Women (% Yes)
<i>In your opinion, is it fair for a husband to hit or beat his wife in the following situation?</i>		
If the wife goes out without telling her husband		
to go to the market for groceries	0	2
when there is an emergency	3	5
when he is not home	3	9
If she neglects the children		
because she was experiencing unusual pressures at work that day	16	5
because there was an emergency	10	4
because she was on social media	58	76
If she argues with him		
when he is at fault	3	2
when she is at fault	48	52
If she burns the food		
because she got busy with the children	13	2
because she had an argument with her husband	23	24
because she was on social media	61	65
If she is unfaithful	75	76
Wife beating is deemed fair in at least one scenario	75	87
Do you think whether it is fair for a husband to beat his wife depends on the circumstances?	65	56
Do you believe it is fair for a husband to beat his wife if she is at fault in the situation?	48	69
Do you think it is fair for a husband to beat his wife if he is at fault in the situation?	0	0
Do you know of any households where the husband is beating the wife?	61	63
Should anything be done to avoid future beating?	73	92
<i>Number of observations</i>	31	56

Despite the wide-spread use of the questions on attitudes towards wife beating, our findings caution towards drawing too strong conclusions based on this indicator. For pro-WEAI and many other analyses the main indicator is whether beating is deemed acceptable in any of the presented scenarios. In some cases, this might reduce the ambiguity that exists when looking at the five different scenarios separately. Yet, this outcome measure is still vulnerable to large inconsistencies.

Curious to compare our findings to those of other surveys, we also look at how our findings compare to the 2015 DHS survey (Ministry of Health and Sports - MoHS/Myanmar and ICF, 2017) (Appendix table A.2). The findings in the DHS, which uses a less specific set of scenarios, are not only different but also not consistently larger or smaller across all sub-indicators. Moreover, the final measure that is generally used, which is whether wife beating is justified under at least one scenario, is dramatically different. Clearly, being unfaithful is deemed less acceptable than the alternative scenario in DHS, which asks about the case when a wife refuses to have sexual intercourse with her husband.

Respect among household members. This module asks about respect, trust and speaking up in case of disagreement. Being respectful is engrained in the culture of most communities in Myanmar, resulting in little chance that people might respond they do not respect another person. After pretest I, we were

concerned that these questions would not yield much variation. In order to increase variance, we included the response option “always”. Quantitative results from pretest II did show variation in responses, but particularly in the answers to “When you disagree [...], can you tell him/her you disagree?” (table 4). While some respondents would indeed say “*I have no experience with a relationship in a household where one household member does not respect another.*” during the cognitive interview, other respondents did mention examples of disrespect, often referring to situations of alcohol or drug abuse.

Table 4. Intrahousehold relationships (in percentage)

RELATION		Do you respect your [RELATION]?	Do you think your [RELATION] respects you?	Do you believe your [RELATION] to do things that are in your best interest?	When you disagree with your [RELATION], can you tell him/her that you disagree?
Husband / wife (N=57)	Always	77	81	86	58
	Most of the time	19	14	12	9
	Sometimes	4	5	2	19
	Rarely	0	0	0	12
	Never	0	0	0	2
Other decision maker within the household (N=30)	Always	67	73	60	47
	Most of the time	27	23	27	17
	Sometimes	7	3	13	17
	Rarely	0	0	0	17
	Never	0	0	0	3

Using results from pretest II, Cramer’s V indicates a high correlation between feeling respected by a relation and respecting the relation (0.60), suggesting to combine these two questions.

5.2 Instrumental agency

Several of the modules that cover instrumental agency, especially those that are also part of the A-WEAI, were well understood. We will therefore not discuss the modules on input in productive decisions, ownership of land and other assets, on access to and decision on financial services, on work balance, and on visiting important locations.

Control over use of income. Pro-WEAI suggests separate questions on whether the output of an activity is used for consumption or sale, and on input on how to use the income from the activity. Similar to what Yount et al. (2019) found in Bangladesh and Burkina Faso, we find that these responses are highly

correlated, with Cramer’s V being 0.71. We therefore also recommend dropping the question on use of output of an activity.

Each WEAI version skips the decision-making questions when a household member indicates he/she did not participate in the activity. We decided to ask about participation in decision-making over income, as soon as any household member was involved in the activity. This adds the benefit of understanding whether household members might have a say over one another’s income. While unnecessary for the index calculation, this could be particularly useful for non-index based analysis on decision making. We find that there is a relatively low correlation between participation in an activity and decision-making over the income from the activity (Cramer’s V is 0.35). Table 5 shows that three quarters of the respondents who did not participate in an income-generating activity done by other household members, still have input into some or most decisions over how to use the income. We therefore suggest keeping questions on decisions making on use of income even if the respondent did not participate in the activity.

Table 5. Participation in and decisions over income from an income-generating activity (pretest II)

Decision-making over income from activity	Participated in activity (%)	Did not participate in activity (%)
Little to no input	4	26
Input into some decisions	34	46
Input into most or all decisions	62	28
<i>Nr of observations</i>	<i>228</i>	<i>46</i>

5.3 Collective agency

Group membership and membership in influential groups. These questions were easy to answer, with only two main issues arising. First, the pro-WEAI suggests an additional question on whether there is a type of group “in your community”, after which follow-up questions on membership are skipped if there is no such group in the community. This narrows the scope of this question to membership of groups within the geographical boundaries of a village. Yet, membership of groups outside of this village is also empowering. It may be better to refrain from the question on existence of this group in the community, or to adjust the skipping pattern. Second, defining an ‘active’ participant was somewhat challenging. Nevertheless, this can be solved by making sure enumerators are well trained and translation is adequate.

Community influence and speaking in public. The module on individual leadership and speaking in public was part of the original WEAI. It was dropped in A-WEAI and pro-WEAI as it was deemed inappropriate to ask in certain contexts. Nevertheless, we decided to test this module for Myanmar, as literature suggests

that community influence and speaking in public might be one of the main sources of disempowerment for women as opposed to men (see above).

The results from pretesting II did not show the striking gender differences that we expected (table 6). Yet, this sample is too small to draw inferences of the population. Our pretest did confirm that respondents thought these questions were acceptable and easy to answer, though conditional on further minor adjustments. Appendix table A.3 shows the suggested new module for Myanmar.

Table 6. Speaking up in public and community influence (pretest II)

	Men (% yes, without difficulty)	Women (% yes, without difficulty)
Suppose you are asked to attend a meeting in the community, do you dare to speak up to help decide on community affairs (e.g. discussions on infrastructure development, community festivals, etc.)?	50	59
Do you dare to speak up in public against local authorities or elected officials in public?	47	49
Do you dare to speak up in public against government authorities or elected officials?	33	27
Do you dare to speak up in public about any issue that is important to you?	55	65
Do you feel you can change anything in the community if you really wanted to?	26	26
<i>Number of observations</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>56</i>

5.4 Differences within Myanmar and across the world

This exercise covered a diversity of agro-ecologies, languages and ethnicities in Myanmar. Yet, we do not observe striking differences across different States/Regions or languages in comprehension or appropriateness of the pro-WEAI instrument. While this is encouraging for applying the pro-WEAI in these different locations and with a diverse population, we must add a word of caution. Myanmar is more diverse than what we were able to cover with our sample. Chin State, a poor and remote State located in the rugged mountains at the western edge of Myanmar, is known for its ethnic diversity and unique customs (Boutry et al. 2018). The troubled and infamous Rakhine State, too, contains a starkly contrasting setting which is not part of the sample of this study. Finally, but by no means conclusively, we mention Myanmar’s States in the South-East, with yet other unique agro-ecologies, livelihoods and customs.

Our results confirm that Myanmar has a somewhat distinct gender and women's empowerment setting compared to many other countries across the world, such as in South-Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa. We find more similarities to research conducted in Southeast Asian countries, even though relatively fewer research has been conducted using WEAI in this region. This includes more participation of women in income-generating activities and more decision-making power of women over income compared to other regions in the world. Such differences, as such, are not necessarily problematic for the indicator.

What appears to be challenging in designing the women's empowerment indicator, however, is the apparent different comprehension and context-specificity of some questions that we came across. Abstract questions and generalizing a response are not easy for a respondent who would like to answer as accurately as possible to the questions being asked. Whereas questions on intrinsic agency were also thoroughly tested in many other countries and researchers were able to successfully implemented them, we find that some of these modules are too problematic to apply in Myanmar. It is also evident that even within Southeast Asia, questions relevant in one setting may not be relevant in another setting. For example, whether it is acceptable to include questions on speaking up in public, and how to phrase these questions, requires in-depth knowledge of local governance structures and context.

6. Conclusion

Some applaud Myanmar for the strong role women play in their households and the seemingly unconstrained participation of women in public life, others disagree and point out that there is no such thing as gender equality in Myanmar (Winterberger 2017). Equipped with the right indicators and proper data, we might be able to rhyme contradictory views and design a constructive and convincing agenda to increase women's empowerment and gender equality.

The concept of gender and issues surrounding gender equality is complex and context-specific, and hence, how to best measure women's empowerment is also context-dependent (Laszlo et al. 2020). The WEAI has been tested and used in a number of areas around the world, but scarcely so in Southeast Asia. To fill this gap, we conducted two rounds of pretesting and cognitive testing of the pro-WEAI in five different States and Regions of Myanmar. We verify how well respondents understand the pro-WEAI and suggest improvements to the pro-WEAI to better capture women's empowerment in agriculture in Myanmar.

Capturing intrinsic agency is challenging. This is also evident from the literature, as we see fewer indicators commonly used to do so compared to other forms of agency. We find that only one of the four indicators related to intrinsic agency from pro-WEAI worked well enough, which is the module on respect and intra-

household relationships. All remaining three indicators: autonomy in income, self-efficacy and attitudes about intimate partner violence against women are often used and validated in a range of contexts. Nevertheless, in the context of Myanmar they did not perform well.

Hypothetical and abstract questions are particularly problematic for our respondents, and such questions are highly prevalent when trying to capture intrinsic agency. The questions on autonomy in income and in the self-efficacy scale did not appear to work well and we suggest dropping these modules entirely. The questions on attitudes towards intimate partner violence against women, too, were deemed problematic. First, there were challenges in phrasing the question so that it is adequately translated and understood. Second, whether a respondent answers positively or negatively to the different questions is strongly dependent on the circumstances, which requires more details than the original five scenarios used in pro-WEAI or DHS (Ministry of Health and Sports - MoHS/Myanmar and ICF, 2017). The concern is therefore that this indicator has large measurement errors and might not be appropriate for cross-cultural comparisons. A similar concern was already raised in 2011 by Schuler et al. (2011), based on cognitive testing in Bangladesh.

We find that the pro-WEAI modules on instrumental agency were easily understood by respondents. These modules were already present in WEAI and A-WEAI. Similar to Yount et al. (2019), we suggest to drop the question on decision-making over self-consumption or sale of output. We do suggest to also ask about input into decisions on income generated by other household members. This simple adjustment would allow for a wealth of additional information on intra-household decision making. Moreover, this information would help from an index development perspective. This minor revision would help in analyzing and assessing the impact of non-participation on empowerment scores, one of the weaknesses of the current index (Yount et al. 2019).

Collective agency is potentially a domain with large gender discrepancies in empowerment. We therefore sought to improve its measurement with an additional indicator, as also recommended by Yount et al. (2019). We re-introduced the WEAI measure on community influence and speaking in public. While it required adjustment to the Myanmar context, the new version was easy to answer for respondents. We suggest adding this module when applying pro-WEAI in Myanmar and to consider adding it in other contexts where it might be appropriate.

The limitations of our study include the lack of coverage of still many different, culturally distinct, communities in Myanmar. More issues might still arise when further testing the pro-WEAI in yet other

contexts. Moreover, before making definite statements on measurement properties of the pro-WEAI in Myanmar and the newly suggested adaptations, we would require a larger sample. This then would allow for using quantitative methods such as applied by Yount et al. to evaluate measurement of women's agency in Egypt (2016) or of the pro-WEAI in Bangladesh and Burkina Faso (2019).

Overall, our study has highlighted to value of cognitive testing. While several parts of the pro-WEAI indicator were easy and appropriate to implement in Myanmar, others were less straightforward. Our findings illustrate that even widely used measures should not be taken for granted and underscore the need to critically evaluate measures of empowerment, even if they have proven appropriate elsewhere.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Sample for 2nd cognitive testing exercise, by gender and State/Region

	Male respondent	Female respondent
Ayeyarwady	5	5
Mandalay	6	6
Kachin	10	26
Shan	10	19
Total	31	56

Table A.2: Attitudes towards wife beating in DHS and pretest II

	DHS (2015)			Pretest II	
	Men (% Yes)	Women (% Yes)		Men (% Yes)	Women (% Yes)
In your opinion, is it fair for a husband to hit or beat his wife in the following situation?					
If the wife goes out without telling her husband	17	22	go to the market for groceries	0	2
			when there is an emergency	3	5
			when he is not home	3	9
If she neglects the children	40	42	because she was experiencing unusual pressures at work that day	16	5
			because there was an emergency	10	4
			because she was on social media	58	76
If she argues with him	13	10	when he is at fault	3	2
			when she is at fault	48	52
If she burns the food	8	13	because she got busy with the children	13	2
			because she had an argument with her husband	23	24
			because she was on social media	61	65
If she refuses to have sexual intercourse with him	10	10	If she is unfaithful	75	76
			Justified for at least one specific reason	75	87

Table A.3: New suggested module on community influence and speaking in public

Suppose you are asked to attend a meeting in the community, would you speak up to help decide on community affairs (e.g. discussions on infrastructure development, community festivals, etc.)?	No.....	1
	Yes, but with difficulty	2
	Yes	3
	Not applicable.....	98
Would you speak up in public against government authorities or elected officials?	No.....	1
	Yes, but with difficulty	2
	Yes	3
	Not applicable.....	98
Would you speak up in public about any issue that is important to you?	No.....	1
	Yes, but with difficulty	2
	Yes	3
	Not applicable.....	98
Do you feel you can change anything in the community if you really wanted to?	No, not at all.....	1
	Yes, but with a great deal of difficulty	2
	Yes, but with a little difficulty	3
	Yes, fairly easily.....	4
	Yes, very easily	5
	Not applicable.....	98

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