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The purpose of this study is to shed light on how development experts and organizations define and operationalize the term "women's empowerment." Utilizing primarily qualitative interviewing and some document analysis, I investigate how experts define women's empowerment, if or how they involve beneficiaries in project design and implementation, as well as how organizations measure women's empowerment and/or project "success." The findings highlight the complexities of women's empowerment and factors that impact the approaches taken to empowering women in the Global South.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: DEFINING AND OPERATIONALZING A CRITICAL VARIABLE

by

Heidi H. Liles

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Dr. Steve Kroll-Smith
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

To all of my participants,

thank you for sharing your knowledge, insights, and experiences with me. I have learned more than I could have ever imagined and will take this knowledge with me as I continue to research international development throughout my career.

To my friends,

thank you for the constant encouragement, coffee meet ups, and laughter. I would not have finished this without you.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Heidi Liles has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

Dr. Kroll-Smith

Committee Members

Dr. Cassandra Workman

Dr. Anthony Hickey

July 19, 2021

Date of Acceptance by Committee

July 19, 2021

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

For decades, the world has been talked about as a kind of dichotomy, the developed and the developing, the Global North and the Global South. Countries within the Global North, like the United States, have seen to it that initiatives be implemented to "help" the Global South become developed and be able to participate in the globalizing economy (McMichael 2017). Development organizations have been working diligently in a vast number of areas to bring the developing world in line with the Global North. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Health Organization, and the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) are among the organizations that have pursued development initiatives including water and food insecurity, as well as health issues (WASHfunders.org).

The idea of women's empowerment, in particular, is fairly new in the field of international development. It is only in the last 50 years that people have been looking seriously at this issue (Calvès, 2009). Women and gender, however, have been topics of discussion in international development before this concept, women's empowerment, found its way into the formal international development discourse (Calvès, 2009; Eyben & Napier-Moore, 2009; Kadam 2006). Historically, women have been systematically disadvantaged and hindered in their attempts to rise above their place in patriarchal societies (Kadam 2006). This issue is a global one and is still present in many parts of the world. Addressing the marginalized position of women is now a key factor in improving global health outcomes, a common target for development projects (Heckert and Fabic 2013). It is worth asking, then, how did the idea of "women's empowerment" become a key issue in development initiatives.

EMBEDDING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN HISTORY

Around the 1970s and 1980s, the term "women's empowerment" worked its way into development discourse; but the idea of empowering women started earlier (Calvès, 2009; Eyben & Napier-Moore, 2009; Kadam 2006; Moser 1989). In 1945, the United Nations was

formed following World War II. Not long after the establishment of the UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted between 1946 and 1948 (United Nations, 2015; United Nations, 2019). This document declared for the first time the goal of universal human rights as an international objective for the first time. (United Nations, 2019).

What is key here is not just human rights overall, but how this document also included the rights of women as human beings. As the document was being drafted in June of 1946, the Commission on Human Rights included a resolution establishing the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) (United Nations 2019; UN Women). The CSW's chapter advocates for equal rights for women and, importantly, shapes "global standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women" (United Nations, 2015; Kadam 2006: UN Women). The declaration and the CSW are important stepping-stones toward discussing women's empowerment, though the term was not utilized in the vocabulary of the Chapter. While women have been in the conversation, broadly speaking, of development, the approaches and understandings of how to include them have shifted over time.

The advancement of the idea of women's empowerment took a sizeable step in the 1960s as discussions arose about how to involve women in development initiative (Calvès, 2009). Women and their place in the world began to be a valued conversation, one taken up by the UN. The first UN World Conference for Women occurred in Mexico in 1975, just before the UN declared 1976 – 1985 the "Decade for Women" (Kadam 2006). It was during this "decade for women" that

> the focus shifted from welfare to 'equity' approach [that] recognized women's active role in the development process as reproductive, productive and community workers and emphasized the fulfillment of their strategic needs through direct state intervention (Kadam 2006:13).

Thus, the "Decade for Women" was an important turning point in the discussion of how to involve women in the development process.

As the shift went from a focus on perceiving women in the Global South as passive to understanding them as active members in the development process, models were developed to help conceptualize how to involve women. One of the earlier approaches was Women in Development (WID). This approach was rooted in the "thought that the process of development affected men and women in similar ways" (Hegemon-Davis 2013:7). Between 1975 to post 1980s, there were several adaptions to WID (Moser 1989).

The original WID approach followed the “Welfare” approach, which particularly emphasized women’s roles as mothers. The original approach, however, faced criticism. In response, a second approach emerged: “Anti-poverty.” This strategy isolated poor women as a distinct type or category (Moser 1989). The third approach to WID was the “Efficiency” approach and the shift “coincided with a marked deterioration in the world economy, occurring from the mid-1970s onward…where problems of recession were compounded by falling export prices, protectionism and the mounting burden of debt” (Moser 1989: 1813). The WID approach, across its multiple adaptations, did not recognize the various context specific experiences of women, as well as missed the critical gender relations aspect that informs understandings of women's experiences (Hegemon-Davis 2013). While this approach faced criticism, it contributed to the discussion on the inclusion of women in the process of development (Hegemon-Davis 2013).

Following WID was another initiative, Women and Development (WAD) (Hegemon-Davis 2013). Porter (1990), as cited in Hegemon-Davis (2013), argued that the WAD approach understood women as being a part of the process, not just a category included in the development process. This approach, much like WID, also faced critiques. It often did not "overtly work towards empowerment of women and girls in programming and initiatives" (Hegemon-Davis 2013). The WAD strategy did, however, start a shift that changed the approach to how women were involved in development projects. From fitting women into current development approaches to building development projects alongside women, this approach started to push the discussion further of how to more precisely involve women.

Through these shifts in approaches to women and development, the complexities of gender, social roles, and gender relations start to become apparent. This moves us into the Gender and Development (GAD) strategy which not only looks at the "socially constructed ideas about gender," but also touches on power relations and women's gender roles (Hegemon-Davis 2013). The GAD approach is where we start to see this idea of women's empowerment emerge in the discourse of international development, as key aspects of empowering women are discussed and focused on.

The GAD initiative "sought to tackle women's subordination through explicit emphasis on socially and historically constructed relations between men and women" (Cornwall 2000:18). Empowerment emphasizes agency and women's ability to make choices (Miedema, Haardörfer, Girard, and Yount 2018). If women's ability to make choices is impacted by their position in relation to men, then talking about gender relations is going to be vital in the discussion of empowering women (Miedema et. al 2018; Cornwall 2000; Hegemon-Davis 2013).

Despite this, GAD has also come under criticism (Hegemon-Davis 2013). This method pinpoints how gender relations play a critical role in empowering or disempowering women. Yet, when we discuss gender relations in relationship to women's empowerment, the viewpoint tends to see men as the issue by limiting women's choices and opportunities. Cornwall (2000) emphasizes how this discourse surrounding gender relations can be problematic when it focuses on men as the problem. Gender relations are a factor at play in women's empowerment, as getting men on board is a critical step in creating the space for the empowerment of women (Aberman, Behrman, & Birner 2018; Cornwall 2000). Clarification of the issue comes about when discussing the understandings of power and power relations that surround the idea of women's empowerment, which I will discuss in more detail later on.

While many of the strategies to involve women in development overlap across the 1950s to 1980s, the "Empowerment" method is the most recent. It is not typically referred to as an "approach," rather it brings up discussions of power dynamics between women and

development (Moser 1989). The term “empowerment” became popularized in the 1960s and 1970s by social workers during the Black Power Movement (Calvès, 2009). The concept was utilized in many theories and writings at the time to discuss oppressed people and was displayed particularly in the writing of Paulo Freire (Calvès, 2009).

As the term gained popularity during this time, it was picked up by feminists in the developing world and “the feminist movement in the Global South can be credited with the formal appearance of the term “empowerment” in the field of international development” (Calvès, 2009:6). Moser argues that the term dates back to the 19th century and “the origins of the empowerment approach are derived less from the research of First World women, and more from the emergent feminist writings and grass-roots organization experience of Third World women” (1989: 1815). The history of the idea of women’s empowerment thus does not begin with its use in development discourse, but much earlier during women’s movements across the Global South as women found the capacity “to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength” (Moser 1989:1815).

MY RESEARCH FOCUS

For the last 50 years, women’s empowerment has been tossed around, interpreted, and approached in many ways in the context of international development. Its original definition was rooted in feminist theory that focused on empowerment as “not something that can be done to or for anyone else” (Cornwall, 2016:344). The term’s definition has shifted focus to things such as economic indicators of empowerment or women’s representation in politics (Eyben 2011). However, it is clear that the conceptualization of the term is broad and abstract. With such varying understandings, having a conversation on the term “women’s empowerment” becomes muddled when the position one takes can be vastly different from another.

In my research, I hoped to shed light on the current definitions of this term and how it becomes operationalized among experts in the field of women’s empowerment. To do this, I

identified experts, such as the heads of NGOs, development program coordinators, and others who implement or design projects meant to empower women in developing countries and then conducted qualitative interviews with them. I assessed these experts' definitions and understanding of women's empowerment, how their definitions compare to one another, as well as compared their definitions to current understandings in the literature on the concept.

My more specific research questions included:

- How do organizations define this complex term, women's empowerment?
- In what ways do NGOs or other foreign aid organizations involve the people they are assisting in coming up with and/or implementing projects?
- How do organizations measure women's empowerment and/or project "success"?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned above, women's empowerment has many definitions and has shifted focus over the decades. Researchers have investigated programs meant to target women's empowerment. Cornwall (2016), in particular, looks at several programs from countries such as Brazil, India, Egypt, and Ghana that are assessed by the research program, Pathways. Cornwall finds our current collective viewpoint of empowerment is focused on economic factors and resource access versus the process that actualizes empowerment (2016). Looking at the programs, she identifies the components of empowerment that development initiatives are not normally targeting. A key theme in her discussion is the relational nature of empowerment, which I will discuss more later on (2016).

While Cornwall (2016) referred to the Pathways program in her discussion on understandings of empowerment, Eyben (2011) provides a more thorough summation of this plan and its findings. "Pathways of Women's Empowerment (Pathways) is an international research and communications programme that has focused for the last five years on understanding and influencing efforts to bring about positive change in women's lives" (Pathway 2011:3). The program looked at over 50 projects in 15 countries and the lived-experiences and understandings of women's empowerment (Pathways 2011). Pathways' research focuses on how we need to understand women's empowerment regarding development initiatives (Eyben 2011).

Empowerment is multidimensional. Eyben discusses how programs can be organized to target social, economic, and political empowerment at once. However, space needs to be made for this to occur. If development projects do not give control to the women and treat empowerment as a destination versus a process, then these projects can be disempowering. She makes a key point about languages. Some languages do not have a word for "empowerment," so trying to use it in English may present the work from the perspective of the

outsider's agenda. In the end, Eyben concludes that Pathways' research has demonstrated the emphasis of cultural awareness and the importance of proper relations between the individuals being targeted and the organized groups setting out to help (2011).

MEASURING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

With the multitude of definitions of women's empowerment and the various discussions on how development projects should be targeting it, it is worth asking how one can reliably measure this critical variable? The United Nations made women's empowerment a priority within the international development agenda when it established Goal 5 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2019). By setting specific goals and initiatives around women's empowerment, there is an apparent need to find ways and tools to measure the progress made to improving the position of women across the world. Heckert and Fabic (2013) looked at the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), a measurement tool used to gather a vast amount of data, and its use regarding women's empowerment. They interviewed 34 experts to find out how the DHS could expand its questions on empowerment. They targeted four countries: Ghana, Mozambique, Senegal, and Uganda. Not surprisingly, cultural context and social norms seemed to be an important component in understanding women's empowerment and how to better inform questions targeting it on the DHS.

> Core women's questionnaire assesses women's empowerment by asking about their say in the use of their earnings, household decision-making (including visits to family members), contraceptive decision-making (among those using contraceptives), the ability to refuse sex, and the acceptability of wife beating. (Heckert and Fabic, 2013:321)

We see clear, measurable indicators are being used to assess whether a woman is empowered or not.

Miedema et. al (2018) also looked at the DHS and the way in which women's empowerment is measured in projects in Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. They focused on 3 components of women's empowerment: enabling conditions, instrumental

agency, and intrinsic agency. They discussed the potential issues with cross-national data on women's empowerment due to different patriarchal contexts. They emphasized "the typology of patriarchy in African settings is different, and women's empowerment may be conceptualized and operationalized differently under these conditions" (2018:455). Their research was limited to the questions on the DHS survey, thus conclusions and components of women's empowerment that could be assessed were prefigured in the United Nations survey. Miedema et al. (2018), however, raise an important awareness of the cultural context component of empowerment and how large surveys, such as the DHS, may not accurately be capturing the empowerment of women across contexts.

O'Hara and Clement (2018) focused on empowerment in the agricultural sector. They looked at the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) and areas where improvements were needed. Their definition of empowerment draws from the work of Eyben, Kabeer, & Cornwall (2008), who write "individuals and organized groups are able to imagine their world differently and to realize that vision by changing the relations of power that have been keeping them in poverty" (113). They emphasized critical consciousness as an important element to women's empowerment and referenced the different types of power (power to, power over, and power within) (2018:112). Their research looked at the "typical" measures of empowerment which many other researchers and measurement tools emphasize, including income, decision-making, and bargaining power.

The section in this article on "local meanings of empowerment" informed my research interest. O'Hara and Clement (2018) discussed how the way outsiders define empowerment, power, or agency may not represent to how the local people define these concepts. Their claims get back to the emphasis on cultural awareness and unique contexts and their impacts on the way people will perceive empowerment, much like other researchers have emphasized (like Pathways 2011).

Diiro, Seymour, Kassie, Muricho, and Muriithi (2018) researched the impact women's empowerment has on small-scale farming productivity in Kenya. They use the WEAI and the Abbreviated Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (A-WEAI), a simplified version of the WEAI, to measure women's empowerment and utilize a semi-structured interview questionnaire written in the participants' native language. Indicators of women's empowerment included: input in productive decisions, asset ownership, access to and decisions on credit, control over the use of income, group membership, and workload. They found the workload did not increase productivity. The researchers consider women as empowered if they "achieved adequacy in at least 80% of the weighted indicators" (2018:3).

MICROCREDIT/ECONOMIC

In previous research on women's empowerment, microcredit has been a common focus. Programs that have tried to empower women in impoverished areas in developing countries will often use small loans to help women gain access to resources which are intended to empower them. Within this framework, money becomes agency. However, there are many critics of microcredit and its use to target women's empowerment.

Drolet (2010) conducted a study analyzing the role microcredit has on empowering women in Cairo, Egypt. She found that while the loans these women were given helped to meet their practical gender needs, they did not contribute to meeting their strategic gender needs, those needs which empower women. Engaging Moser (1993), gender needs come out of gender interests, or "'prioritized concern', [which] translates into a need…[or] the 'means by which concerns are satisfied'" (1993:37). Again, drawing on Moser's understanding of strategic and practical gender needs, Drolet defines practical gender needs "as the needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society" (2010: 633). She goes on to define strategic gender needs as "the needs women identify because of their subordinate position to men in their

society" (2010:633). For her, it is these strategic gender needs that are key to the empowerment of women as they help to challenge traditional gender roles.

Bagati (2003) looked at microcredit programs in New Delhi, India, and the impact they had on women's empowerment. Bagati utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data from a sample of 18 households. This researcher had a more positive view of microcredit, seeing it a starting point for empowerment, however, not necessarily due to the economic component of the program. She found group meetings were an important component of empowerment. "Empowerment, for these women, became a function of joining the microcredit group, attending meetings, and initiating change in their perceptions and attitudes" (Bagati, 2003:33). Putting this in terms of strategic and practical gender needs, the loans themselves, as Drolet argues, only meet women's practical gender needs. The component of the microcredit program that may have helped to meet strategic gender needs is the changes in attitudes among the women through the group interaction. These discussions help to empower women to see beyond their current social roles.

Mamhud (2003) looked at women's empowerment in relation to microcredit in Bangladesh. Mahmud discussed the different levels at which empowerment must be assessed, as well as different types of empowerment: material empowerment, cognitive empowerment, perceptual empowerment, and relational empowerment (2003). The author utilized survey data from a study on microcredit programs. Rural households who were involved in the micro-credit program, as well as those who were not, as a comparative. Access to material resources and non-material resources was used to analyze empowerment. Participation in microcredit, Mamhud concludes, did not appear to have an obvious impact on empowerment (2003).

EDUCATION

Yet another common way empowerment is approached is through education. In many countries, women have limited access to education (Omwami 2011). Thus, an argument can be

made that through education, women can be empowered. As Francis Bacon pointed out in the 16th century, “Knowledge itself is power” (Heath 1861/2009: 94-95). Provided with knowledge, women are empowered. However, the approach to women’s education in Kenya can impact the outcomes of their empowerment as seen in the research presented below.

Takayanagi (2016) analyzed the empowering nature of literacy and self-help groups formed by women in a Maasai village in Kenya. She utilized ethnographic methods and interviews in her research and relied on two particular women’s narratives. The women can be a part of a group through the literacy center started by the women themselves; and they come together to empower one another through creating a space to communicate, as well as help each other with microfinance. The women were not pursuing challenging gender inequality in a political sense, but they did seem to be opening up a more harmonious relationship or dialogue with men. This article also provided a different viewpoint of microcredit/finance with a more positive light and grassroots approach to it without outsiders.

Cobbett-Ondiek (2016) analyzed educational programs focused on educating girls in Kenya on gender and sexual violence. The researcher looked at what is going on in these programs through observation, emphasizing the need to see what these programs are doing. She claimed most other research of programs like these direct their attention to the pre- and post- data, not emphasizing what it is these programs do to bring about change. We are presented with this idea of "space for change."

For this research, the spaces were about the atmosphere the facilitator brought about in the discussion of gender and sexual violence. Two different facilitators and programs were looked at, one facilitator appeared to provide an atmosphere that promoted change, while the other emphasized traditional gender roles. The conclusions found by Cobbett-Ondiek (2016) were that the facilitators of these programs can vastly impact the outcome, as well as while changes may occur in these spaces, they do not necessarily reflect changes outside of the space.

Omwami (2011) looks at how, even decades after colonial powers have left, women still struggle for access to education in Kenya. She presents this historical perspective of education from colonialism to the mid-2000s in Kenya, though the legacy of colonialism lives on, especially in the realm of gender inequality in education. Colonial education worked to perpetuate gender roles, and even in post-colonialism, we see how patriarchy impacts government and policies, as well impacts education. We do see where primary education becomes accessible for most children in Kenya, but girls' presence in the classroom dwindles quickly in secondary education. They are almost non-existent in higher education.

Omwami (2011) contributes location and cost as part of the issue with women's access to education, but there are also issues of patriarchy embedded in the culture. She also takes the time to address how development agendas are looking at women's education as only an economic benefit. Education has been a perceived pathway to helping women become empowered and women’s empowerment has shown to boost other economic and development goals, helping to explain why women’s empowerment is a development agenda.

GENDER RELATIONS

As alluded to above, empowerment is relational. There are social and gendered relations between project personnel and recipients (Cornawall 2016), as well as social and gendered relations between men and women receiving intervention. Aberman, Behrman, and Birner (2018) looked at the concept of power regarding gender relations. The authors discussed the concept of power in a theoretical sense by discussing Weber's and Foucault's respective theories of power. Focus group interviews were done in the Nyance Province of Kenya with men and women. This research emphasizes the importance of cultural and social contexts in understanding power relations and the impact development projects can have on these relations (both negative and positive) if the context is or is not taken into consideration. They reason as follows:

> "development projects that fail to take into account the complexity of local power dynamics may lead to ineffectual policy or programming or to unintended consequences within the household…For instance, in some contexts, programmes promoting economic empowerment of women have unintentionally increased women's work burden relative to men, and even lead to increased incidences of marginalization and domestic violence" (2018: 390, 393).

Cornwall (2000) looked at Gender and Development (GAD) and the discourse around sexual categories, focusing specific attention on "missing men." Cornwall argues there is a tendency in development discourse to focus only on women, leading to viewing women as victims and thus viewing men as a problem. She also emphasized how "western gender constructs and binaries" do not translate into other cultural contexts where these constructs and binaries are not relevant. She argues we need to change the discourse we are using in GAD to open a door for men's involvement. Their involvement in the changing status of women is vital. In many African countries, community is highly valued, and it is men and women working together in the making of communities. A similar approach needs to be used in GAD. She emphasizes there are power differentials between men and women, and the goal is not to lose the focus on women's issues (2000).

LARGE SCALE DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

When digging into the development discourse, big names like the United Nations, USAID, and the World Bank are some of the top organizations with programs focused on women's empowerment. As previously mentioned, the UN outlined the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 Agenda, where one goal targeted women's empowerment (UN Sustainable Development Goals 2019). Yet, the UN is not the only major organization to make mention of women's empowerment. For example, USAID works towards female empowerment in Kenya (USAID 2020). The World Bank has also emphasized the need for agency in development initiatives focusing on empowering women and girls (Klugman et al. 2014). More specifically, the World Bank made women's economic empowerment an initiative in 2006 (Eyben & Napier-Moore, 2009).

Table 1. UN Sustainable Development Goals 2019 Report for Goal 5

Goals and Target	Indicators
5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere	**5.1.1** Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex
5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation	**5.2.1** Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by form of violence and by age
	5.2.2 Proportion of women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to sexual violence by persons other than an intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by age and place of occurrence
5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation	**5.3.1** Proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18
	5.3.2 Proportion of girls and women aged 15 – 49 years who have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting, by age
5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social production policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate	**5.4.1** Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age and location

5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life	**5.5.1** Proportion of seats held by women in *(a)* national parliaments and *(b)* local governments
	5.5.2 Proportion of women in managerial positions
5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agree in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences	**5.6.1** Proportion of women aged 15-49 years who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care
	5.6.2 Number of countries with laws and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to women and men aged 15 years and older to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education
5.a Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws	**5.a.1** *(a)* Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; and (*b)* share of women among owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land, by type of tenure
	5.a.2 Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control

5.b Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communication technology, to promote the empowerment of women	**5.b.1** Proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex
5.c Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.	**5.c.1** Proportion of countries with systems to track and make public allocations for gender equality and women's empowerment

*Information is taken directly from the SDG 2030 Agenda 2019 Report

Through the SDG Report and other development organizations, it becomes clear there are many indicators of women's empowerment which are looked at by large scale development organizations. Over the years, microcredit and other economic approaches have been heavily critiqued and questioned over whether or not they are actually empowering (Drolet, 2010). However, many of these indicators are hitting strategic gender needs, such as "legal rights, domestic violence, equal wages and women's control over their bodies," which Moser says will challenge women's current unequal status with men (1993:23).

Understandings of women's empowerment in development can be drawn from these organizations, but how do these indicators and goals get met "on ground" in development projects? I expected the answer to this question to emerge during interviews with experts as I asked questions around the means of identifying project "success" that targets women's empowerment.

ADDING TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT

Women's empowerment literature has, historically, been based on Asian countries (Heckert and Fabic 2013). This becomes an issue when trying to apply approaches and understandings of women's empowerment in the cultural context of African countries. Women's mobility in different sectors is more free flowing than countries in Asia (Heckert and Fabic 2013).

My research will help to begin filling this gap in the literature on conceptualizing women's empowerment in Africa within the context of international development. By focusing on individuals implementing, operationalizing, and conceptualizing the concept of women's empowerment, a broader understanding of the groundwork that is occurring around this concept will be brought into the discourse.

Hegemon-Davis (2013) brings a foundational contribution to the scholarly literature by bringing development experts on women's empowerment into the conversation and shedding light on how they conceptualize the term. I expect to expand upon her contribution by locating my research in the context of Africa. Development cannot continue to be a one size fits all approach, especially when each country and region has its own unique culture and gender norms. Through open-ended interviews, I will be able to gain an understanding of how development experts in women's empowerment make sense of this concept within the context of where they are working. If experts are working in rural Kenya, for instance, by approaching my research with broad questions about their perspective and understandings of women's empowerment, I will be able to address the "western view" of empowerment critique (See, for example, Hegemon-Davis 2013).

As with Hegemon-Davis (2013) and Heckert and Fabic (2013), whose research studies experts' understandings of empowerment, my research will be building upon this work. Understanding of this population's work in defining and operationalizing women's empowerment will bring a unique viewpoint to research on this fundamental idea. If we are to understand how women's empowerment centered development projects are created, we need to go to the experts. This will also provide a context for other researchers to build on. Specifically, it will pave the way to comparing how experts' perceptions of women's empowerment intersect with the women's perceptions of empowerment in the developing countries where these initiatives and projects are being implemented.

CONCEPTUAL/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this research, I will deploy the concept of power from Michel Foucault's perspective, and bring in an analysis of gender needs using Maslow's hierarchy of needs. My approach here comes from grounded theory. That is, I am not setting out to prove the validity of these theories, but rather using them as sensitizing concepts, as ways of seeing and making sense.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is an approach that allows the data to inform the construction of theory (Bowen 2006). The approach encourages the constant interplay between the data, analysis, and theory (Tie, Birks, and Francis 2019). Embedded in grounded theory is the idea of the sensitizing concepts. Herbert Blumer introduced the protean idea to remind sociologists that abstractions are ways of seeing, inviting us to look at the world through this or that lens. He writes, a sensitizing concept "gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (Blumer 1954:7). For the purpose of my research, sensitizing concepts include cultural codes, Foucault's ideas of power, practical and strategic gender needs, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Again, I am not setting out to test or prove the validity of these theories and concepts. I will use them as a framework and vocabulary to guide both the collection and analysis of data.

Cultural Codes

Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith (1993) presented an argument for, what one may call, a social sphere on American civil society and the cultural, binary codes that help us to understand what this sphere is and is not. Through their research and analysis of civil discourse, Alexander and Smith (1993) identified democratic codes and counter democratic codes. As the United States is typically understood to be a democratic society, individuals and structures in America would then want to be viewed as democratic and avoid being counterdemocratic. "The democratic code has a sacred status, whereas the counterdemocratic

code is considered profane" (1993:4). The description between the sacred and profane gives us a deeper understanding of the perspective of these cultural codes. I present this brief summation of "The Discourse of American Civil Society" to begin conceptualizing women's empowerment in terms of a set of "unique culture codes" within international development (Alexander & Smith 1993:1).

In grappling with the definition of what women's empowerment there are contrasting understandings of just what is empowering, or disempowering, for women. I suspect when experts are asked to define women's empowerment, discussions will arise on factors that disempower them or may hinder their empowerment. One might call this a disempowering code. Keeping in mind "cultural codes" which come out of the international development discourse on this concept may prove to be invaluable to the conceptualization and operationalization of the empowerment of women.

Power

Across the literature surrounding women's empowerment, the root word "power" comes up time and time again. Eyben, Kabeer, & Cornwall (2008) focus on the change in power relations as a central component to empowerment, while O'Hara and Clement (2018) build on this definition by pointing out the varying types of power (to, over, and within). Aberman, Behrman, and Birner (2018) think about this in terms of gender relations and how programming can impact the power dynamics in the household. They further draw on theoretical understandings of power from Weber and Foucault (Aberman, Behrman, & Birner 2018).

Foucault's theory of power allows us to understand the concept's impact on conceptualizing women's empowerment. For him, power is not something one simply possesses, but exists in relationships (1983). Power, for Foucault, comes in two forms: negative and normalizing. Negative power is when physical force or violence is required, but it is normalizing power that is most often utilized.

> Rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies…in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations (Foucault 1982:780).

This idea of power relations is between the subject and those who are exerting power. For example, there is a power relation between women and men, and also between women and women. The interactions, or performances, that occur between these characters is where power is exerted, but no one single person possesses the power (Foucault 1983).

In *History of Sexuality* (1983), Foucault discusses representations of power in relation to juridico-discursive. From this vantage point, law exerts its power from the top down. In this context, law "is" the culture instead of the culture changing and leading to changes in the law. In this context, he is describing law as negative power. Power is coming through obedience to the law. We see how this approach often fails in the context of Kenya. While the laws have changed to allow women rights to land, within the cultural context, women still struggle to gain access to land (Oduol and Kabira 1995; Wipper 1971; Foucault 1983).

Foucault emphasizes how power is not an institution or object to be possessed or taken away. The relational aspect is key in understanding power from Foucault's point of view. Across the literature of women's empowerment, however, power is viewed as something that can be taken away, which is why women in the context of Kenya, view empowerment as taking power away from men (O'Hara and Clement 2018). The perspective of power as a zero-sum game is held by many women in the setting where O'Hara and Clement studied (2018). This counter viewpoint of power from Foucault's seems to present problems for those working to empower women in Africa. It creates a barrier between implementors and beneficiaries as implementors may face push back against the empowerment of women. If the beneficiaries of projects understand power as a zero-sum game and women's empowerment equals the disempowerment of men, then this viewpoint can impact how receptive they are to women's empowerment projects. The question must then be raised on how experts within international

development work with or around this understanding of power, as something that is possessed? With the case of O'Hara and Clement (2018), the position one takes of power, either as a relationship or a zero-sum game, will impact how projects targeting empowerment will be received by women, as well as the outcome.

Hierarchy of Needs

Moser (1993) analyses the approaches of gender planning within development and the structures which help and hinder women in attaining "strategic gender needs." Moser views these as empowering for women versus approaches that only meet women's "practical gender needs." These practical gender needs, discussed more later regarding Drolet's research, tend to only help women in their socially accepted roles (Moser 1993). "In practical terms, policies to meet practical gender needs have to focus on the domestic arena, on incoming-earning activities, and also on community-level requirements of housing and basic services" (Moser 1993:40). What Moser claims is that gender planners need to focus on meeting women's strategic needs that will help them to "achieve greater equality" (1993:39).

To better understand the implication of what Moser proposes, it is helpful to turn our attention to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Mawere, Mubaya, Reisen, and Stam (2016) critique Maslow's theory by claiming "it is not validated in contexts or environment other than those where the theory was created. This validation outside of a western framework is important given how Maslow's theory emerged from American cultural emphasis on "individualism" (2016:56). Though Malow developed his theory in the American context of individualism, his insights are useful to this inquiry. The argument Maslow presented was that an individual must meet certain needs before perusing higher needs (Aruma and Hanachor 2017). This first-this-then-that component of Maslow's theory, I think, challenges Moser's argument.

In 2016, Mawere et al.(2016) point to the cultural bias in Maslow's hierarchy, while also noting the significance of his fundamental idea that lower needs must be met before higher

needs are pursued. What does this mean for practical gender needs and strategic gender needs?

CHAPTER III: METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Research surrounding women's empowerment in the Global South involves an array of methods, including surveys, qualitative interviews, and ethnographies (Mahmud, 2003; Drolet, 2010; Bagati, 2003). What separates much of the previous research on women's empowerment from my project is the particular group of people I interviewed. Across the literature of women's empowerment, there is an emphasis on cultural sensitivity and awareness of the population that development projects are targeting. This emphasis leads to further questions on how organizations involve the people, in this case women in developing and implementing projects. As these projects are conceptualized and constructed, it is critical to understand how women's empowerment is operationalized as this will impact how targets, goals, and measurements of project success are created. These understandings are what I expected to gain more insight on from talking with experts in this field of women's empowerment.

Research on women's empowerment has focused on populations in countries within Africa and Asia. But little work has been done specifically on the experts who formulate, that is operationalize, definitions for women's empowerment. Jessica Heckert and Madeleine Short Fabic (2013) interviewed experts on the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) to find out how surveys could be expanded around the issue of empowerment. These researchers went to specialists in the field of women's empowerment, an approach I mirrored in my work.

Raya Hegemon-Davis (2013) conducted research similar to my project. She utilized questionnaires and qualitative interviewing to conceptualize empowerment in the realm of education in International Development (Hegemon-Davis, 2013). She interviewed 21 experts in the field of women's empowerment. I used her study as a guide to construct my research design.

Hegemon-Davis notes that one critique of her research is it comes "from a Western viewpoint of empowerment" (2013:69). By "western viewpoint," she means that understandings

of the term came from current literature that was conducted and conceptualized by researchers in the Global North. This bias can be expected as much of development's history is rooted in the idea that countries within the Global South must "catch up" with countries in the West (McMichael 2017).

In assuming that countries in the developing world are behind, a comparative perspective is raised between the developed world and the developing world. For the case of women's empowerment, indicators of the term are taken from a Western worldview that in effect states that what the West views as empowering must then be empowering for women in the developing world. In Hegemone-Davis' research, the Western viewpoint of women's empowerment was rooted in the structuring of her questionnaire, which is why a critique was raised by experts who were viewing empowerment from a different perspective than the culturally limited Western understandings (Hegemone-Davis, 2013). This issue is why I opted for qualitative interviewing without the utilization of a questionnaire prior to interviews. The space created by semi-structured qualitative interviewing allowed for interviewees to discuss their understandings of empowerment without being limited to pre-formulated questions about topics of women's empowerment that are centered on a western understanding of the concept.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

While the epistemic assumptions of quantitative methodologies enjoy a privileged status in sociology, there are significant pieces of the social world that fall outside the vocabulary and logic of quantitative methods. Qualitative methods assume that the lived-experiences of people and the stories and narratives they fashion to make sense of those experiences are critical in gaining an in-depth perspective of the complexities of social and cultural life (Weiss 1994). It is this complexity I sought to explore via qualitative interviewing.

Qualitative Interviewing

Qualitative interviewing allowed me to get to the granular details and understanding of how experts in the field of women's empowerment in international development operationalize and conceptualize this concept in their projects. Hegemon-Davis (2013) contributed valuable insight into the perspectives of these experts, however, as often discussed across women's empowerment and development literature, the way we approach empowerment needs to be culturally appropriate to the population we are assisting. Experts in this field can be found across the globe, not only in the Global North but also in the Global South, as Hegemon-Davis demonstrates in her research. With this awareness in mind, I did not want to bring in my western assumptions of empowerment. I aimed to allow the interviewees to have the freedom to expand on their understandings of women's empowerment from their cultural and social backgrounds.

In his *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Craft of Qualitative Interview Studies,* Weiss makes a strong case for the value of qualitative interviewing. Developing detailed descriptions, integrating multiple perspectives, and fashioning holistic accounts are a few reasons he listed that I find to be exceptionally relevant to my inquiry (1994:9-10). He notes, that in the context of the qualitative interview, we can "learn about settings that would otherwise be closed to us: foreign societies, exclusive organizations, and the private lives of couples and families"(1994:1). Being able to interview experts in development organizations brought valuable insight to how these organizations think about women's empowerment. This insight may allow connections, or disconnections, to be drawn between the implementation of projects targeting women's empowerment and the discussions among researchers in the women's empowerment literature.

Qualitative interviewing takes three forms: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Weiss 1994). Each form has its own pros and cons, but I find that semi-structured interviews give space for respondents to enlighten me on the detailed understanding of their world view.

Specifically, how do these experts understand and make sense of their work and its role in empowering women? This particular interview strategy allowed me, as a woman, to compare their thoughts and feelings with my understandings of the world. As a woman in the western world, I have the freedoms and power that women in the developing world typically do not have. Western ideals and values may, and often do, conflict with the cultures of countries within Africa. With this comparative awareness in mind, I approached these interviews with a general direction but attempted to limit bringing in my world view that could direct conversations with interviewees into a Western understanding of women's empowerment.

Document Collection

In addition to interviews, I collected reports and data that track plans, outcomes, and results from development projects. The United Nations (2015) has an abundance of documents that chart the progress of organizations working toward the Sustainable Development Goals. I included document collection as a part of my approach to understanding how women's empowerment becomes operationalized in development initiatives. I also asked interviewees if they could offer any documents that may prove beneficial in helping me understand the operationalizing of the concept of women's empowerment in the context of development projects. A comparison between the interviews and this documentation also served as an essential component in making sense of how the organizational understandings and definitions of women's empowerment get translated into projects.

SAMPLING

After gathering a list of development experts and international development organizations, I sent out an initial email to individuals I hoped to interview. Following my initial four participants, several put me in contact with others they felt I should interview. In total, I interviewed eight development experts. Of the eight participants, I included the seven that had the most salient information related to my research questions. The participants were located in

United States, Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, Norway, and Portugal. On average, each interview was between an hour to an hour and a half. While I attempted to reach out to both male and female development experts, all of the individuals I interviewed were women. Due to my sample being made up exclusively of women, there may be limitations to my findings.

TECHNICALITIES

Due to the ongoing pandemic of COVID-19, travel is restricted, and social distancing has been highly recommended by health experts. While in-person interviews would have been optimal for this research, I instead opted to conduct interviews via Zoom. This approach also provided the benefit of being able to access experts outside of my local vicinity. Utilizing virtual means of interviewing allowed me to connect with experts across the U.S. and the world.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I sent out a letter of confidentiality to each participant describing any potential risks and benefits to participating in my research project. The risks were minimal as the interviews were focused on speaking with experts within their realm of work. That is to say, I spoke to development experts on topics related to their work within development, which they do in their daily lives. With permission from the experts I interviewed, I digitally recorded the interviews and uploaded them to a secure cloud storage.

Table 2. Participant Information

Participant	Position	Countries/Regions They Have Focused On	Approximate Years Working in Development
1. Margarette	Gender Consultant	Kenya mainly, but has consulted for surrounding African countries	17 years
2. Joanne	Lead Economist for Gender Group	Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and several other African countries	Unknown
3. Katherine	Gender Consultant	Haiti, Dominican Republic, Bolivia, Honduras, South Africa, Zambia, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Eswatini, Mozambique, and other countries in Africa and Latin America	Over 30 years
4. Laura	Director for Project Delivery Team over Africa within an International Development Organization	Former Yugoslavia, countries in South America, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Rwanda, and other countries in Africa	20 years
5. Jen	Director of an organization that focuses on women's rights in Angola	Angola, Zimbabwe, as well as Sub-Saharan Africa overall	Over 30 years
6. Anna	Gender Consultant	Mozambique, Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, Ghana, Georgia, Armenia, and other parts of Africa	30 years
7. Leah	Development Consultant, particularly for health and social services sector	East Timor, Lesotho, and Mozambique	14 – 16 years

CODING AND ANALYSIS

After transcribing interviews and collecting reports and other additional documentation, I coded the data and identified themes. When coding, my approach was informed by grounded theory. Grounded theory typically takes an inductive approach to analyzing data, allowing for the development of a theory rather than testing an existing theory (Nicole Deterding & Mary Waters 2021). However, “Timmermans and Tavory (2012) suggest that the best qualitative researchers are sensitized by the previous research early on; their projects are not wholly inductive” (Deterding & Waters 2021:714). Suggested here is the idea that even though we might work from the bottom up, that is inductively, we must use words, vocabulary. I followed the inductive lead of grounded theory while keeping firmly in mind the sensitizing concepts that drive my analysis (Blumer 1954). A discussion of these abstractions can be found under the header: Conceptual/Theoretical Framework (See p. 19). They guided the codes and themes I identified in this section.

I began the coding process printing out each of the seven transcribed interviews and doing an initial coding of each individual interview. For each of my three research questions, I had a corresponding highlighter color that I used as I went line-by-line through each interview transcript. Once each transcript was coded, I went through each of the seven interviews three separate times. Each time I kept one research question in mind looking for themes specific to that question. Thus, I combed through each transcript four times, but additionally went back and forth between transcripts as I identified themes and noted differences. I followed the same procedure when coding and analyzing reports and documents that were sent or recommended to me by participants.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

There were three main guiding questions I sought to answer and seek clarification on through the interviews. The first was, how do organizations define this complex term, women's empowerment? The second was, in what ways do NGOs or other foreign aid organizations involve the people they are assisting in coming up with and/or implementing projects? The final question was, how do organizations measure women's empowerment and/or project "success"? In some ways, the answers respondents gave overlapped across these three questions.

In the Definition section, I will provide the definitions that participants gave when asked, how they would define women's empowerment? Additionally, some of the documents and reports that participants shared also included definitions of women's empowerment and are included in this section as well.

The Involvement section will examine the ways in which NGOs and other foreign aid organizations involve beneficiaries of projects in the crafting and implementation of projects. While the focus of this research is on women's empowerment, the question was also posed to participants if they involve men in the process, in addition to women. The involvement of beneficiaries in the design and planning portion of development projects varied for different reasons. I will discuss how people are involved, if at all, as well as factors that impact whether or not beneficiaries are involved in the process of project design and implementation.

For the Measurement section, I will first discuss how women's empowerment becomes operationalized through specific indicators. A discussion will follow on the tools utilized by development experts to measure women's empowerment, as well as how they view project "success." Many participants did not mention particular measurements besides the Demographic Health Survey (DHS) and the Women's Empowerment Indicator in Agriculture (WEIA). They typically mentioned using a variety of forms of data such as surveys, administrative data, and interviews.

DEFINITION

How do organizations define this complex term, women's empowerment?

My initial thinking around this question was that by talking with development experts, a clear understanding of how international development organizations go about defining the term "women's empowerment" would be found. However, through these conversations with interviewees, there was a distinct difference in perspectives of women's empowerment. One was how donors and governments make sense of the term, and how implementors understand and view it. Katherine was one participant who talked about reading a project on family planning that "was written by somebody in Washington who has no idea what the landscape looks like and that's what happens a lot." Development projects that come out of the United States are often "prepackaged," as Leah described it, which limits what implementors are able to do. Meaning, while implementors may know what will and will not work within a context and what will actually lead to empowering women, if the contract does not have it written in, the implementors are often unable to make significant changes to the project.

The complexity of this process is discussed in more detail in the Involvement section. Nonetheless, Katherine was not the only participant to bring up this issue and distinction between donor/government understandings of women's empowerment versus implementors' perspectives. The distinction between the two becomes evident when looking into measuring women's empowerment and project "success," which I will discuss in more detail later on.

When asking interviewees how they would define women's empowerment, definitions varied, but many emphasized similar themes. Interviewees discussed women's ability to make decisions, have agency, access to education, have political representation, and employment, as well as power in general. For most participants, there was no singular thing that would make a woman empowered, but a combination of things.

Even when looking over documents shared by participants, understandings of women's empowerment was complex, and involved more than one factor. For example, when looking at a Request for Proposal (RFP) for a "USAID Female Empowerment Activity" in Colombia, it included a Statement of Objectives that discussed the purpose of the activity as well as a "Theory of Change/Development Hypothesis" (USAID 2020: 133). The hypothesis stated,

> If women's economic participation increases, men and boys are engaged to transform gender norms and attitudes, and the awareness and implementation of gender-related policies improves, then violence against women will decrease and women will be more empowered in Colombia (USAID 2020:133).

The assumption here is that by implementing the activity, it will help to address Gender Based Violence (GBV) and thus empower women. In this particular example, it seems women's empowerment comes about by breaking down structural barriers or cultural issues that plague women and their ability to participate in society.

Table 3. Participants' Definitions of Women's Empowerment

	Participant	Definition of Women's Empowerment
1.	**Margarette**	"Women's empowerment is the ability of a female to be able to determine their life choices, you know, to be able to have a choice, to make decisions, to be able to control their life outcomes."
2.	**Joanne**	"women's economic empowerment I'm specifically thinking around income earning opportunities and opportunities for improved socioeconomic well-being." "women's empowerment in a larger sense may be tied to things like women's role and leadership and say even COVID pandemic response which wouldn't tie in, to me, to women's economic empowerment. That would be more the kind of general empowerment space."
3.	**Katherine**	"Basic knowledge is empowerment, at least it's the first step." "It all goes back to access to information, the ability to understand the information, and then take actions and, hopefully, you have an enabling environment that will allow you to do that."

4. **Laura** "When we're talking about women's empowerment, we're not only talking about the economic aspect, we are talking about agency. We're talking about access to education, access to political representations, um, its social empowerment as well. You know, it's all of those things that would have to qualify as empowerment, not just having a job and not just having a skill and not having a skill – Ha! We are so inclined to ensure that women have a skill or a job, even if it's in the house because, yeah, there's this idea that, of well, the culture. You know, they have to stay home because of the culture. Well, okay, that's not empowerment then."

   "Greater level of agency among the women"

5. **Jen** "In development, it's that women are at the center of the decision-making process related to development, not only within their communities, but international development."

   "Empowerment means we are empowering you or maybe it's the way that it has been used over the years, but um yeah, I feel that improving their agency, to make more sense."

   "Knowledge is power. When people have knowledge, they're better able to make concrete decisions about their life, so when one of the results that I feel are very important is that increase in knowledge."

6. **Anna** "Women's empowerment is when women have the freedom of agency and the ability to decide and act and express themselves freely and these can be the context of the household or the school, at work and overall in the society, and this includes the exercise of their legal rights and and when I say legal rights, it ah- the quality level as that to men or proportional, because sometimes it's not all the rights are equal for men and women. The biological differences that women have and I'm talking about biological women ah would not be those that men would have a talking about at work men do not need most likely, a specific right or have flexible hours to breastfeed obviously, uh huh, but these are the kind of things that are often overlooked."

7. **Leah** "I think for me it's how it played how it actually plays out in in in your home and daily life and how free you are to to to do the things that you able to do as a woman, without restrictions from from a hierarchical level within within the household, within a marital level, within within a relationship that you have, and that that your your roles and boundaries are not and I guess hemmed in by sort of structural and gender roles of what for a woman, um, what a woman's role should be as in a household or in a caregiver or the domestic work that goes along with living in a household and those a shared equity really within within the household. That you're free to work and that and that you're free as a person to progress that you're not inhibited because you're a woman, or structurally within organizations and employment because you're a woman and that you're safe to work and go to work and be free, that those for me, are the sort of fundamental principles of being

> empowered and having and having that freedom of choice to make in and around your reproductive health right, so your financial rights or and I think those much I think those are much better reflective elements of women's women's empowerment and where they sit within a society. So, while I understand and respect that the sort of parliamentary level I don't necessarily think it's reflective of how women live their lives, particularly as women in parliamentary levels often don't necessarily advocate for women in the way that you would want them to do."

Decision Making, Agency, and Action

The first theme that arose from the interviewees' definitions was decision-making. For Margarette, she said, "women's empowerment is the ability of a female to be able to determine their life choices, you know, to be able to have a choice, to make decisions, to be able to control their life outcomes." These ideas of control, choice, and decision-making cut across many aspects of women's life. Across the scholarly literature, decision-making has been a core aspect of women's empowerment (Eyben, Kabeer, and Cornwall 2008; UN Sustainable Development Goals 2019; Aberman, Behrman, & Birner 2018).

Jen also emphasized women's ability to make decisions. For her, women's empowerment meant that, "In development, it's that women are at the center of the decision-making process related to development, not only within their communities, but international development." This particular emphasis on women's involvement in the conversation of development starts to touch on my second research question, in what ways do NGOS or other foreign aid organizations involve the people they are assisting in coming up with and/or implementing projects? Jen, as a director of a development organization, makes it a priority to involve women in the development process, but that is discussed in further detail in the Involvement section.

While decision-making was mentioned, women's agency was also highlighted. Jen noted, "When we're talking about women's empowerment, we're not only talking about the economic aspect, we are talking about agency." When asked to define women's empowerment,

Anna also pointed out agency, stating, “Women’s empowerment is when women have the freedom of agency and the ability to decide and act and express themselves freely.” It’s the ability to make the decisions freely. Participants talked about this across contexts, in the home, workplace, political system, and society as a whole.

Knowledge

“Basic knowledge is empowerment, at least it’s the first step” (Katherine). Women and girl’s access to education has been emphasized by development organization and scholarly researchers (Omwami 2011, Takayanagi 2016, and Cobbett-Ondiek 2016). For several participants, knowledge and education were important pieces in the empowerment process. There are often additional barriers that women in the Global South must overcome to use the knowledge they gain, but nonetheless, it is a critical aspect to empowerment. In Jen’s words, “Knowledge is power. When people have knowledge, they’re better able to make concrete decisions about their life, so when one of the results that I feel are very important is that increase in knowledge.” Women’s empowerment is not simply being able to make decisions, but informed decisions.

Katherine shared a story about a debate that was for secondary and high school students where a primary school director was able to get her students into the debate.

> Her school won the region and beat out the national debate. It beat out the high school, which was highly funded and beat out some other private school and the Ministry of Education said, how did you do this? You don’t have computers. You barely have desks. And she said, my girls can read.

Here, it’s clear that knowledge and education open up doors to empowerment. Katherine also shared about a study being done in Mozambique where “some World Bank consultant came back and said these women aren’t educated enough to do anything and I’m like, excuses me, they can count. You know? So, there’s different perceptions.” These examples demonstrate the importance of knowledge, but also show how there are different understandings on what that

looks like. The perceptions of those who know the region and people, and those on the outside looking in.

Economic

When looking into women's empowerment in development, women's economic empowerment is often the focus, as Cornwall (2016) points out. Economic empowerment

> includes women's ability to participate equally in existing markets; their access to and control over productive resources, access to decent work, control over their own time, lives and bodies; and increased voice, agency and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels from the household to international institutions (UN Women 2018).

As an economist, Joanne's mainly discussed the economic side of women's empowerment. The organization she works for does not have a singular definition for women's empowerment or women's economic empowerment, but for her, she stated,

> women's economic empowerment I'm specifically thinking around income earning opportunities and opportunities for improved socioeconomic well-being… women's empowerment in a larger sense may be tied to things like women's role and leadership and say even COVID pandemic response which wouldn't tie in, to me, to women's economic empowerment. That would be more the kind of general empowerment space.

The economic side of empowerment such as jobs and income earning, particularly focused on closing gender gaps, was the main avenue of women's empowerment that Joanne discussed. All other participants made some reference to jobs, skill training, economic decision-making, or women's economic empowerment during the interviews, however, they often discussed it as a piece of empowerment that seems to be the typical approach to empowering women, but also misses other components of women's empowerment when it is the sole approach. This is elaborated on more in discussing critiques of women's empowerment that participants discussed.

Critiques

As interviewees discussed how they understood and defined women's empowerment, many also discussed critical views on how women's empowerment is viewed and discussed in

development. This included only focusing on women's economic empowerment, as well as the use of the term "women's empowerment." Katherine stated,

> Empowerment is not just economic empowerment. Like in Swaziland, these girls had their information, they knew what to do with it, they debated both sides of the gender-based violence issue and they won the debate….so, these girls weren't empowered economically.

Laura also critiqued the approach to only talking about women's economic empowerment,

> Thinking of women's empowerment only from an economic perspective, so if a woman has a job, she's empowered. Well, not quite…so you can have a job and really not be empowered, but you're working off a lot and its- I will definitely concede that having a job and having access to money definitely can give you more options, but it doesn't happen naturally. It's not an inherent…I think that's where things start getting a little bit tricky is when we start calling access to jobs, "empowerment" when it's really, yeah, I mean if we just look at the US, a lot of women have jobs, but we also see a lot of gender inequality…I would agree that having this economic opportunity is important, and we do owe it to folks to facilitate their way to great access of other aspects of life as well.

What interviewees emphasize here is that women's empowerment is more than this one approach, economic. It is indeed an important component to the empowerment of women, but focusing on just economic empowerment, misses other important, enabling components in the empowerment process. To put this into further perspective, Katherine pointed out that,

> We can give a woman all the tools that she needs, but if there is not an enabling environment it doesn't mean anything. You know, everybody's like if you build it, they will come. I said, not if a father won't let her out of the house.

While not specifically discussing economic approaches to empowerment, Katherine's statement demonstrates the complexities of navigating women's empowerment and gender issues in local cultures.

Another critique that came up was the use of the term "women's empowerment" itself. Jen said, "I actually don't like the word empowerment because I feel that um, women have the power and we say that we are empowering them. We are basically saying they don't have any and we are giving that to them." When asked to elaborate further on this topic, she stated,

> In essence, women do have the power, and certainly that maybe we might not know it up to what level they have the power within their communities, so they've always done things. They've always protected their own, they always come up

> with strategies to ensure their involvement. So you find that, like in Africa right? We always say that our mothers are the ones who make all the decisions. Our fathers didn't speak on their behalf, so, meaning that it's pillow talk. That's what we say, meaning that whenever whenever there're situations women have got a voice, although that voice is not releasing. So, um, for me, it's about how then we work with them to make sure that that voice is now heard, to make sure that their presence is felt within the community.

What Jen argues here is when using the term "empowerment," an assumption is made that women do not have any power and that it must be given to them. Which she believes is not the case. The issue is women not being heard and seen.

The other side to this critique goes into how power is understood. As mentioned in the Theoretical/Conceptual framework, Foucault discusses power as relational, but O'Hara and Clement (2018) point out that power is viewed, by some in the context of Africa, as something that can be taken away. The critical view of "women's empowerment" that Jen holds seems to be rooted in the particular understanding of power as something that can be taken and given, versus how Foucault presents it as relational. There is a power dynamic between implementors and beneficiaries of development projects, and if the issue of power is to be addressed, there is a need to involve beneficiaries in the development process.

INVOLVEMENT

In what ways do NGOS or other foreign aid organizations involve the people they are assisting in coming up with and/or implementing projects?

When asking participants, in what ways, if at all, they involve the people they are working with in the design and implementation of projects, responses varied. For some organizations, the involvement of beneficiaries is central to project creation and for others, it seemed there was no involvement at all. However, it quickly became clear how complex the process is for designing and funding development projects, specifically with larger international development organizations. A majority of participants emphasized the importance of involving

beneficiaries, but also discussed how difficult it can be for various reasons, but often came down to the availability of funding.

Large-Scale Organizations vs. Small NGOS

As participants discussed if and how they involve beneficiaries in the process of designing or implementing projects, one factor that impacted involvement was the organization. Leah discussed the differences between governments on this,

> these newer ideas, a sort of designed by implementation, I think I think really effective, where you actually involve the entities that you'll be working within the design and you do that, over a slower period of time, and because donors are often in such a rush, they don't allow the time for that design so, then they design for and rather than with. So, you know, these ideas of sort of co designing the sort of human centered design, where you work together, then they're really nice ideas and I like them. I don't know how practical they are from donor perspectives, but, but I think the Australian Government has a bit more of a flexibility to do that, and I think the US Government is certainly leaning towards that in in some, in some element, so you know, maybe these sort of women's empowerment projects would be would be suitable for that sort of like a co-design, co- co-creation and working out what actually means for women to be empowered and what that would look like and what the project can do to enable that to happen so.

She went on to say,

> With the US Government, for example, um designing a project that that would go out to tender, you're not you're not really able to involve anybody, because you can have some interviews and discussions that, beyond sort of superficial and getting the validation that, yes, a family planning project will be useful because that's the type of money that that you're designing the project for. But in terms of what the government wants, uh, you, you can't really talk to- you're limited in how many people you can talk to.

The entities one works with plays a major role in the ability to involve beneficiaries in the project design. The process for how a project gets designed through USAID does have significant research and consultation put into the design before it is developed and implemented, but involvement of beneficiaries seems to be minimal if they are involved at all. Katherine says, "I mean they have all these analyses and then everybody in Washington, supposedly with input from these countries, but again its input at a high level decides what the program is going to do." There is data on countries that is available to analyze and make a decision on what project

would be beneficial. However, “when you’re designing projects, you’re always looking at what the in-country data is and often there is not a lot of in country data” (Katherine). Typically, a gender assessment is done to better understand the gender issues that are at play in the area that the project is meant to be implemented. USAID states,

> Gender analysis is a subset of socio-economic analysis. It is a social science tool used to identify, understand, and explain gaps between males and females that exist in households, communities, and countries. It is also used to identify the relevance of gender norms and power relations in a specific context (e.g., country geographic, cultural, institutional, economic, etc.) (2016:7).

Once this information is gathered, a Request for Proposals (RFP) is sent out, from USAID, that will outline what goals and services are requested and NGOs or other development organizations will write up a proposal to do and one of the proposals sent in will be chosen to implement. There is research and data driving the design process, but this often happens with a short turn around and thus limits the time organizations have to talk with potential beneficiaries.

The approach for large organizations, such as USAID and the World Bank for example, is still very much a top-down approach to development. Jen argues for the opposite,

> I think we need to start applying a bottom-up approach in terms of defining development priorities, rather than a top-down approach, because when you look at it often people just sit on they sit on - at their desks and think out solutions which might not even work.

Her arguments echo the point made by Katherine who discussed she had a read a project that was written by someone in Washington who did not understand the landscape. Try as they might, large-scale organizations taking a top-down approach miss critical information in project design, despite doing analysis prior to starting designs.

With the top-down approach, that might also mean there are various levels of actors that project ideas go through before they even become solidified. The complex structure of large-scale organizations makes it difficult to pinpoint if or how often beneficiaries are engaged in the dialogue of project design. Joanne stated that,

> Well, all of our projects are designed jointly with governments. But they're not usually designed for governments, you know they're about reaching. Well,

> depends like projects in the education space may impact teachers who are public servants, but they're ultimately about the students right? They're all ultimately about some part of the citizenship getting the benefit of government resources, hopefully to make their lives better. So, to what extent those people, the non-government people are involved in project design really depends on the project.

This highlights how if the communication is between donor organizations and governments, it may be difficult to know to the extent beneficiaries are involved.

With local NGOs, the involvement of beneficiaries and project design can look quite different. As the director of an NGO that works on women's rights in Angola, Jen emphasized how, in her organization, they try, "to ensure that girls and young women are at the center of that development process or work that we are going to do." This approach here aligns with how Jen also frames women's empowerment, that women are at the center of decision-making. Involving them not only gives them a voice and agency, critical components to empowerment, but can also lead to sustainability of project outcomes. Margarette emphasizes that, "If we are working long term, in order for those changes to be sustainable, then you must work with the communities themselves." Being able to involve communities in the development process has a long-term impact.

Project Design and Project Implementation

While the involvement of beneficiaries varies depending on organization, when they are involved, it also varies. Some organizations and implementors are able to involve beneficiaries from the very beginning in designing projects, but others only involve beneficiaries in the implementation side. The approach of "cocreation" was mentioned by two participants which is an approach to involving communities in the project design. Laura explained it,

> So, meaning that the potential partner works with communities and government actors on the ground to then develop their proposal, so I think that is definitely useful and helpful, but it does, it is much more costly for implementers because if you don't have a project in the country, then like you really have to send people there to actually do it.

Here, she highlights a barrier that came up in other interviews in various ways, the issue of cost. On the one hand, organizations can try to involve beneficiaries and communities in the design

process, but on the other hand, this is limited by available funding and whether implementors had a presence in the country prior to the project. Funding plays a significant role in not only the involvement of beneficiaries in the project design process, but can also dictate what is and is not able to be included in projects based on the allocation of funds. However, this is a complex issue in itself that needs further research.

The involvement of beneficiaries in design faces another barrier, donors. Kathrine stated that, “implementors will do whatever the donor wants.” Meaning that donors are the ones laying out the goals they want achieved and where funding will go. Donors’ timelines will also play a role in if beneficiaries will be able to be involved in the design. According to Leah,

> these newer ideas, a sort of designed by implementation, I think I think really effective, where you actually involve the entities that you'll be working within the design and you do that, over a slower period of time, and because donors are often in such a rush, they don't allow the time for that design so, then they design for and rather than with. So you know these ideas of sort of co designing the sort of human centered design, where you work together, then they're really nice ideas and I like them. I don't know how practical they are from donor perspectives, but, but I think the Australian Government has a bit more of a flexibility to do that, and I think the US Government is certainly leaning towards that in in some, in some element, so you know, maybe these sort of women's empowerment projects would be would be suitable for that sort of like a co design, cocreation and working out what actually means for women to be empowered and what that would look like and what the project can do to enable that to happen so.

Again, the entities one works with can play a role, as these are who provides funding for projects and dictate timelines. Laura also mentioned the quick turn around with having to submit project proposals having “usually six to eight weeks that we have to put something together.” This would not give implementors much time to discuss project ideas with beneficiaries, especially if implementors do not have a current presence in the region.

While involving beneficiaries in the design process has many barriers, participants recognize the sustainability and positive impacts that it brings. Margarette specifically pointed out that,

> sometimes communities will participate, because it has come to them, and it has benefits, you know to them, but it doesn't change anything…in order for you to

> transform you need also to design with the community. So coming down at the community level to you know, to really interrogate what is the biggest barrier.

The community knows the barriers and obstacles that stand in the way of change. While they will participant in the project, it does not guarantee a change.

Beneficiaries' involvement in project implementation is a more common way to see how beneficiaries are involved. When it comes to projects that have a direct impact on people within communities, such as family planning programs, access to education, promoting women in leadership, or gender training, it clear to see that beneficiaries have to be involved in the implementation process. One example being, for the NGO Jen directs, one project they do is a leadership training for young girls. The girls a directly involved in the project, but they also had a voice in the design as well. The question of whether or not beneficiaries are involved in project implementation was not really an issue; what came up was the different ways they are involved and who in particular was involved, which varied depending on the project.

Involving Men

Researchers have offered several reasons justifying the involvement of men in initiatives that intend to empower women for several reasons. One reason was cultural dynamics. In various contexts across Africa, the welfare of the entire community is highly valued, meaning the people from these contexts consider the needs of others over their individual welfare and empowerment (Aberman, Behrman, and Birner 2018). For example, Aberman, Behman, and Birner (2018) discussed how women they interviewed in Kenya worried about their empowerment leading to the disempowerment of men. Another issue is the increased burden placed on women that comes with their empowerment, particularly economic empowerment (Cornwall 2000). Women gain access to jobs and are able to have a voice in economic decision-making, but their other roles such as caring for the family and children, are not mitigated (Cornwall 2000). To assist in addressing this double burden women are having to carry, men need to be involved to help. The question is then raised, if implementors and

development organizations do involve people in designing and implementing projects, who are they involving? Just women or also men? Participants had varied answers to this. For some, men were involved in some projects or there were separate projects also being done for men. Many, however, shared perspectives that involving men in projects that were typically focused on women was critical for changes to occur and success to happen.

One of the main ways participants discussed how men were involved was in family planning and antenatal care conversations. Margarette talked about how, when working with expecting mothers, “a good entry point would have actually been to encourage men to accompany their spouses to health facility for checkups and making sure that they are interested in all the progress.” Cultural norms play a huge part in the need to engage men in antenatal and family planning. It goes into the power dynamics which Margarette explains, “that because the men hold the power of making decisions, it is coming to them and letting them understand that. Because of the way decisions are made up the household, this is why we have the outcomes that we have.” What she is pointing to is the patriarchal system where men often, or are at least viewed as, the head of the family and hold the most decision-making power in the home. Thus, men need to be involved in projects that are trying to increase women’s antenatal visits, taking their medications as advised by medical professionals, and for them to have access to other health care resources because men play a significant role in household decision-making and what women have access to. Anna even pointed out that,

> studies have shown that, when there was male engagement there was more compliance with a minimum antenatal care services and there was going to be better practices and care throughout the pregnancy, later they will be more institutional delivery that would be safer, breastfeeding practices, and they will comply much better with mother to child transmission of HIV, etc,

The involvement of men in antenatal care has positive impacts. However, there are also other important reasonings for engaging and involving men as well.

Aberman, Behrman, and Birner (2018) point out that some development programs “unintentionally increased women’s work burden relative to men” (393). Sociologically, this is not

a surprising issue if we look at women in the United States, for example, and the “second shift.” The concept references how women will work a job, but still come how and have to fulfil other caretaking duties like childcare and/or housework (Hochschild and Machung 2012). A similar issue plagues woman in the Global South as well. Helping women to gain access to the labor force or leadership opportunities often does not alleviate duties prescribed under traditional gender roles. Margarette emphasizes how she has,

> seen instances where women have become very empowered and the men have let go of their responsibilities so that now women may have got the double burden, you know, you know they are empowered, but we have the burden of taking care of the entire family.

While a solution to the double burden on women is not clear, part of it is rooted in engaging men and bringing men along in the process of empowering women.

Bringing men along and involving them in the development process does not only serve to help the position of women, but also addresses the issue of men and boys getting left behind. Leah discussed her experiences in Timor saying,

> So I think working with men and boys is and in the last 10 years has really… there's been a lot more emphasis on it. I mean, to the extent that that I think the women's empowerment has taken off for very importantly in, and it was and it's completely necessary but, but now we're also seeing that men don't access health services as much as women and child marriage in boys is going up, whereas child marriage in girls is coming down, so I think I think that there's…there needs to be some recognition as well that the two go hand in hand and that we should we shou-, you can elevate one without elevating another.

Leah’s experiences resonate with Cornwall’s (2000) observations regarding how men are missing from GAD and the problems that arise from solely focusing on women. Margarette reasons that it’s about,

> taking everybody along, so that the focus is not necessarily be on girls and women, but also on the the rest, and the rest now are men and boys, to make sure that whatever gains you get on this side and not negated or undermined by the disempowerment of men or men feeling disenfranchised.

Men’s disenfranchisement/disempowerment are important issues that can and do impact women. The disempowerment of men as a result of the empowerment of women is an idea

discussed by Aberman, Behrman, and Birner (2018). In interviews in Kenya, women did not want to take power away from men, which digs deep into how power is understood, a theme that has also come out of my interviews (Aberman, Behrman, and Birner 2018). The issue of men's disempowerment, or at least the argument of them being left behind, has been displayed outside of health services and child marriages.

GBV was another area where participants emphasized the importance of involving men. Laura said, "if you're addressing GBV, you have to work with men, I think, even more than women." While GBV is often viewed as violence against women, Leah discussed the Neverland Project and how,

> they did a baseline of violence for men and for women and found that rates of violence among men with men and sexual violence for men was was incredibly high as well, so so that was the first time that they were able to- they identified the the the the perpetrators were also had also been perpetrated themselves.

This knowledge changes the perspective and shift the conversation around prevention of GBV. In many contexts across the globe, culturally, conversations about men being sexually assaulted or facing GBV are taboo and as a result, there are not many resources for men. Anna points out that, "Men do not have a place that they can go and tell that "I have been raped." This is something nobody's thinking about." GBV is a gender issue that does not only affect women, and as Katherine points out, "everybody seems to think that gender only refers to women."

MEASUREMENT

How do organizations measure women's empowerment and/ or project "success"?

Understanding how organizations measure women's empowerment and project "success" brings up, first, how the term becomes operationalized. This varies depending on the project. Often, the goal is to increase or decrease a particular variable, whether it be rates of GBV or women in Parliament. During interviews, participants mentioned a variety of indicators that are targeted in development projects that are targeting women's empowerment, or elements of empowerment. These include: issues of power and control, gender-based violence

(GBV), gender equality, gender gaps, access, decision making, ownership of property, education, labor force participation, child marriage, poverty, participation in politics, female genital mutilation, access to reproductive health information, HIV rates, women's economic growth, harassment and gender policies in the workforce, LGBTQ+ issues, and women in leadership positions. These many variables are the ways in which the positions of women in particular contexts are evaluated and understood. They are also the foci of the projects themselves. For example, a project might be designed to increase women's access to family planning resources. The empowering component in a project such as this would include providing women with knowledge that will in turn help them to make informed decisions; but the project could also work toward providing women with opportunities to have the ability to make decisions about their health and fertility.

While participants discussed specific indicators and goals that are targeted in women's empowerment initiative, Anna pointed out that development organizations look at the goals the UN establishes,

> who are the ones who establish the very, very top goals, then that, by the way, includes like the Sustainable Development Goals from I mean the United Nations, and most of the countries are aligning to those 20- for the agenda 2030 and, and that that serves everybody as a guidelines to align to them.

As mentioned previously, the UN SDG Goal 5 seeks to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (UN Sustainable Development Goals 2019). Listed in Table 1 are the goals, targets, and indicators from the SDG 2019 Report, which many of the indicators that participants mentioned aligned with the goals from the report. However, some participants also held critical views on some indicators that are used to assess the empowerment and position of women in a society.

All participants made mention of women's representation in political or leadership positions. Leah explained, "That's an indicator that that always seems to be the sort of gold benchmark standard of where women sit within a society." In some countries, there have even

been seat specifically reserved for women in government. However, several participants pointed out that having women holding political positions in a country does not always equate to women's empowerment as a whole. Anna described an example of a woman who had held a significant position in a government but did not fight for women's issues and rights in a way that would help them. Anna said that, "being a woman doesn't mean that you're necessarily are gender sensitized or you will be fighting for women issues." Women's representation in political positions is one measure, but also how they advocate for women's issues is another. Leah argued this same point,

> I don't necessarily think it's reflective of how women live their lives, particularly as women in parliamentary levels often don't necessarily advocate for women in the way that you would want them to do. So that might be a better indicator is how effective parliamentary women are advocating for women's rights and empowerment within the roles and functions that they have within Parliament.

Indicators may not always reflect what they intend to. While having women's representation in political spaces may be empowering for the individual woman, it does not mean that it reflects progress toward gender equality or women's empowerment.

The same issue was echoed in regard to how women's education participation is measured. Education, as mentioned in the Definition section, is an important component to women's empowerment. However, Leah pointed out that,

> We're looking at enrollment. Now, enrollment doesn't necessarily mean that people are attending, and enrollment doesn't necessarily mean that people are completing, so we should be, we should be looking at the end mark.

Here it's clear that what the indicator being assessed might not algin well with the way it is measured and evaluated. However, all of these indicators are a part of the larger goal to empower women, which is more complex. Leah stated,

> I think that those indicators are one thing, is what I'm trying to say is the reality, but those indicators mean and where the true empowerment is reflected I think is not captured and I think that there's subtleties that needs to be captured.

When asked to elaborate on this, she said,

> I think that they're too simplistic. Um, I don't think that they reflect the reality and the multi- the multiplicity I guess of what women have have to do and strive with and contend with, um to be really empowered.

Women's empowerment is complex, but many development project need to have goals and measurable indicators to see the impact of a project. However, a solution to this issue Leah raises, is unclear. It does lead more into how organizations go about measuring women's empowerment and determining project "success."

Measurement Tools

Participants did not always point to a specific measurement tool, but the DHS and WEAI were specifically mentioned. Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) was mentioned by Margarette who said,

> that particular index has good specific, you know, measures and you're looking at access, you're looking at control, you're looking at decision making, you're looking at ownership of property, you're looking at different things that will tell you whether a woman is empowered or not.

Laura discussed the use of the DHS studies which are typically done every few years, which are then able to show changes over time. She also mentioned that,

> DHS studies are really solid, if not, you would have to do really extensive one and then do a mid-term and the same in year three and then in year five and just you know measure how it went down. You know, you would also want to know Columbia has fair labor rate, labor participation rate for women, but you would want to look not only in any increases in terms of labor force participation, more reflective of success would be women in management and senior roles.

Katherine also discussed how she used the DHS to look at, "where were the sites where there were interventions around gender-based violence and how was there any shift, had anything happened." The DHS has been viewed as reliable and is utilized by many development organizations but has also been critiqued for the limited number of questions on women's empowerment (Heckert and Fabic 2013). Nonetheless, implementors use it to look at specific country data to see the changes of issues overtime that help to inform their approaches. Being able to see the change from say year one to year three of a project also helps to determine

project “success.” There are typically goals for projects to identify certain indicators as increasing or decreasing over time.

When it came to health-related indicators, administrative data was typically utilized. Leah mainly worked on health-related projects in Timor, so her work around women’s empowerment involved GBV and Family Planning. While she had to “use administrative data the health services are using” it was “not necessarily accurate” (Leah).

For the NGO Jen directs, they used a variety of evaluation tools from surveys to group interviews. Anna also discussed the use of surveys when evaluating change overtime during a project,

> you might have comparisons between baselines, for instance, there are also another way to measure, and that includes like behavior surveillance surveys, sometimes that behavior surveillance surveys are biological component and when you conduct them at the beginning, medium or at our end of a project, then you can you can also look up what whether there was any an impact in their attitudes and behaviors and eventually in the status of people.

However, surveys can be costly as Leah points out, so typically, implementors will try to use data that is already available, whether from other organizations or government data.

Project “Success”

Understanding project “success” is complex. While improvements might be made, if the goals donors set are not achieved, then a project might not be considered “successful” using that metric. However, most participants found it difficult to provide an example of a project that was “unsuccessful.” They often shared a project that did not work in the way they intended it to or parts of a project that could been changed to insure a more successful result. Overall, “success” was often discussed in practical ways. Leah discussed what she looks for in the projects she works on,

> success would obviously be women- more women having antenatal care, women seeking a school birth attendant more women having access to contraception and using it and taking it, more women being able to access health services without asking permission and there's a reduction of violence in their household if they were experiencing violence, so those are the types of things that I would be looking at.

How project success is evaluated will vary project to project and depend on the indicators being targeted. However, projects are often intended to have long term impacts. Jen shared that,

> success is actually measured up to like something like three or five years because it's supposed to be long term. It's about asking ourselves, okay, after what we have done what has changed in the lives of that community?

For some indicators, change take a long time to be able to see. Margarette pointed out that, “You're not going to see change after two years.” It is only after “5,10 years is when you really begin to see change.” While projects intend to have a long-term impact, organizations do not always follow up after a project to see if it was sustainable. A project is typically evaluated throughout its lifecycle, from beginning, to middle, to end. However, after it is closed, not all organizations go back to see if the impacts endure, are sustained. Leah observes, the

> USA doesn’t do sustainability reviews, unlike the European Union, for example. So the European Union would send a team back in about two years after a project closed not not all projects but, but they have they sample um, projects and come back in and do a sustainability evaluation to see whether the intervention that they had funded two years earlier or five years earlier, whether whether there's anything that's that's maintained because of that.

While projects are intended to have long term impacts, there is not an evaluation done after the project has been closed, or completed, to assess if there were long term impacts, at least not with the USA. As Leah points out, the European Union does do sustainability reviews after two years for select projects. Here, it is clear to see that there is a disparity between how organizations do or do not monitor long term impacts of projects. Joanne talked about how the organization she works with does evaluations,

> So what we tend to do with our results frameworks is have measures of impact of the project in the very short run, which, as I mentioned before, it could be the number of beneficiaries covered the number of trainings given, the reporting back the self-reporting by beneficiaries on satisfaction with the training. The evidence that these interventions actually work in the long run, has to come from other studies that these types of interventions, lead to a successful outcome.

Jen discussed why it varies,

> It also depends on the resources that are available for you to conduct the monitoring. So most funders, many funders actually don't give enough resources to do the project, um it means monitoring and evaluation suffers. But I think

> there's not been an increase migration to funding two-to-three-year project for example, right? I know, the European Union and funds three-year projects. Sometimes five-year projects, which is very good, because that way you're able then at the end of those five years to have enough resources for you to conduct monitoring and evaluation of the project that way you can say okay from the first year to the fifth year this is what we achieved.

Evaluation is expensive, so if funding is not written into a project design for sustainability reviews after the project closes, it does not get done. Again, as with involving beneficiaries in the design process, doing suitability evaluation is also impacted by cost. Further inquiry is needed to understand the complex issue of organizations intending to have a long-term impact and the lack of long-term evaluation being done following projects.

Overall, determining project "success" comes down to the goals and indicators set within a project and if changes were seen from the beginning to end of a project. This theme came up time and time again during interviews, when asked about the results they look for, Anna stated,

> Increased representation, participation, completion of adherence services, reduce economic hurdles, uh improve for instance, issues on on malnutrition, um, reduce child marriage, prevent or-or track more trafficking, reduce female genital mutilation, reduce and or killing…Again it's pretty much depends on the type of project you're working on, but that would be a looking at the figures that could help measure either an increase outcome, or is an outcome that something has been increased or decreased depending what the issue is about.

Increasing or decreasing an issue plays into project success, but Laura also mentioned that there may be a specific amount of change in an issue stated in the project proposal. For example, she discussed a project in Myanmar,

> one of the components of the project was to drive tolerance of violence against women down by like a ridiculous percentage. That there's no way we could do in five years, of something like like maybe 50 or 60% is impossible, like you, can't you- can't go into a country and reduce tolerance of GBV, which is so culturally that I mean it would be like changing support for the second amendment in the US in five years, like you're not going to do that. Not by 50% and not even close.

While in this example, the percentage of change expected to come as a result of a project was not feasible from the perspective of implementors, it highlights how there are specific goals in mind when projects are designed.

My findings around how development experts define women's empowerment demonstrate the complexities of the concept and its approach. Additionally, hearing how beneficiaries are involved in project design and implementation, as well as how the term becomes operationalized and measured in development projects, displays the nuances of the women's empowerment in the Global South. There are a multitude of factors that impact each one of these processes, i.e., the empowerment of women, involvement of beneficiaries, and the measurement of the concept. There is no singular definition or approach to women's empowerments and that, in itself, highlights just how contextual and ambiguous it is. Participants shed light on the intricacies surrounding women's empowerment in development, as well as raised critiques of how it is being approached and perceived. In the discussion, I will ground the ideas and critiques discussed by participants in using concepts from the Theoretical/Conceptual Framework. I will also discuss the need for further research on women's empowerment in development.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The literature surrounding women's empowerment and the findings from interviews and documents highlight the complexity of the concept. Definitions provided by participants emphasized women's ability to make decisions and have agency, as well as have access to information and education. Katherine's definition highlights many of the main themes, she states, "It all does back to access to information, the ability to understand the information, and then take action and, hopefully, you have an enabling environment that will allow you to do that." Women need to be able to access information through health services, education, and other spaces in order to make informed decisions, but they also need to have the ability to make decisions and take action. This demonstrates how women's empowerment is multidimensional as Eyben (2011) points out.

POWER RELATIONS

As women's empowerment seems to be rooted in agency and power, there are power relationships that need to be considered in regard to empowering women in the Global South. There are power relations between men and women, as well as between women and development organizations. As mentioned, Foucault discusses power as a relation, not something one can possess. However, depending on the context, understandings of power can vary, and may be viewed as a zero-sum game. O'Hara and Clement (2018) highlight this in their research. Jen also addresses this idea in her critique of women's empowerment. How power is perceived can impact perceptions of empowerment.

In one way, if power is seen as something one can possess, women may view empowerment as taking power away from men, as shown in O'Hara and Clement (2018). If this is the perspective held by a community, that can pose a major barrier to implementing a project that will empower women, especially in a patriarchal context. Having an awareness of these context specific understandings of power plays a critical role in informing one's approach to

development projects that intend to empower women. One way to help in this is to engage men. Laura pointed out that if you only involve women, it may make people think you are radicalizing them. She emphasized that,

> you just have to make sure that everybody understands that it's not about radicalization. Um, you know that a lot of times the work that we're doing improves family life, improves health, levels within a family within a community. It's better for kids in terms of education and health as well, um so you do have to appeal to those aspects that are generally associated with women in terms of caregiving and talk about how it's going to be helpful for the family and how it's going to be helpful for her to contribute to those roles that the community values.

It's about showing that the empowerment of women brings benefits to many and is not about taking away power from men and giving it to women.

Looked at in another way, power as a zero-sum game could be seen as implementors as giving women power and thus assuming they had none to begin with, as Jen discussed. She counters this zero-sum game assumption, emphasizing the ways women already had power and how that was not the issue, rather it was about having their voices heard. The argument here is not to say how power should and should not be understood, but rather highlighting how the different perspectives of power can impact the perceptions of women's empowerment. Being aware of these perceptions is critical to informing one's approach to creating projects to empower women.

Outside of the perspective of power as something one can give and take, the power dynamics between development organizations and people on the receiving end of projects is also complex. As many participants discussed, beneficiaries do not tend to be involved in designing projects. There are exceptions to this depending on the organization and available funding, but overall, their voice is not a part of the conversation. This could be a missed opportunity to empower women.

STRATEGIC GENDER NEEDS AND PRACTICAL GENDER NEEDS

Moser (1993) discussed strategic gender needs and practical gender needs that are targeted in development projects. Strategic gender needs contribute to the empowerment of women while practical gender needs assist in fulfilling women's traditional gender roles. Listening to participants and how they discussed women's empowerment has been approached in projects, it seemed some projects met strategic needs, others practical needs, and some met both types of needs. For strategic gender needs, these are needs that "relate to gender divisions of labour, power and control and may include issues such as legal rights, domestic violence, equal wages and women's control over their bodies" (Moser 1993:39). The indicators of women's empowerment that participants mentioned included all of these. Multiple participants emphasized women's agency, control over decision-making, and power dynamics as critical components to empowerment and these were issues targeted in projects.

Participants also highlighted indicators that fall more in line with practical gender needs. "Practical gender needs are a response to immediate perceived necessity, identified within a specific context. They are practical in nature and often are concerned with inadequacies in living conditions such as water provision, health care, and employment" (Moser 1993:40). Leah and Anna, specifically, discussed the importance of women having access to basic health care and family planning resources. Many projects focus on helping women gain access to these basic resources and human rights, but these initiatives work to meet women's practical gender needs and not strategic needs. This is not to say that meeting practical needs is not an important issue, but rather that it is distinctly different from meeting needs of women that will help to empower them and challenge traditional gender roles.

In some ways, you have to look at both. Margarette discussed how one has to look at the very basic level of women's needs. This includes access to food, shelter, and health, but at the same time, looking at women's ability to make household decisions. Here, the focus is on

the microlevel needs of women within their homes, both the practical needs and strategic needs. Once these are met, the next step is going to the higher levels outside of the home such as women's ability to come together and form agency. These are practical needs as well as strategic needs, and both can be focused on, but perhaps not in the same project.

The distinction Moser (1993) makes between these practical versus strategic gender needs does bring up what actually empowers women. When asked about indicators and projects that focus on women's empowerment, participants discussed indicators that cut across both types. What may not actually contribute to women's empowerment, from the perspective of Moser (1993), was grouped in by participants. Meaning, participants viewed women's access to health care, for example, as an issue in line with the empowerment of women. Looking back, however, at the definition of practical gender needs outlined by Moser (1993), health care is a practical need and thus, in Moser's argument, does not challenge traditional gender roles. Conversely, specifics within health care such as access to contraceptives and other family planning resources can give women control over their own bodies, which would fall under strategic gender needs (Moser 1993). The microlevel features of the indicators participants discussed can fall into both strategic and practical gender needs. The grouping of these needs, however, presents further questions into the order in which these needs must be approached. Maslow offers the idea of a hierarchy of needs in which an individual's basic needs must be met before moving on to higher needs. As mentioned before, Maslow's theory has been heavily critiqued and does not fit well into contexts in the Global South, but the idea of a hierarchy can be utilized here.

Margarette discussed looking at multiple levels of women's experiences, not only when it came to their basic needs, but also at what level they were participating within society and their communities. She looked at their decision-making in the home as well as within the community and how they were participating in leadership in the community and in politics. The question is then raised, do women's basic, practical needs need to be met before targeting initiatives that

will meet strategic needs? Further investigation into this is needed to draw a conclusion, but it is clear development projects are working to meet both.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Participants brought to light answers to many questions, but also brought issues that require further research. While women's empowerment includes economic elements, it is not the sole driving force of empowering women, however, many development projects and organizations do focus only on women's economic empowerment. Part of this may be rooted in the emphasis on measurability of project impact and availability of data. Quantitative data is much more readily available and does not tend to require being in the country and speaking with the population prior to project implementation. Surveys and interviews are more costly methods of evaluation, which would be more ideal method to use when evaluating women's personal experiences that would highlight other factors of empowerment. Further research is required to understand the emphasis on the economic side of women's empowerment while experts emphasized how its multidimensional.

Another question that requires further investigation is the effectiveness of large -scale organizations and top-down approaches versus grassroots organizations and bottom-up approaches to women's empowerment. I talked to mainly individuals who worked with large-scale development organizations that took a top-down approach, but the one individual I interviewed worked with an NGO that seemed to take a bottom-up approach. A larger sample size would be needed draw a comparison. However, Mosser (1993) points out that,

> Historically, top-down state intervention alone has not removed any of the persistent causes of gender inequality within society. The capacity to confront the nature of gender inequality and women's subordination has only been fulfilled when it has incorporated the bottom-up struggle of women's organizations (p. 39).

It may be that a combination of both approaches is needed, but to what level that is occurring in the international development world is unclear.

Cost and funding also seemed to be an underlying factor that impacts major approaches in development projects. Participants had talked about how funding impacts if and to what extent beneficiaries are able to be involved in project design, as well as the ability to evaluate project sustainability once it has been closed. Funding also is allocated to specific sectors, initiatives, and occasionally, populations. Additional research is needed to understand how funding gets allocated, the impacts it has on development projects and initiatives, as well as if or how it hinders women's empowerment.

LIMITATIONS

Prior to conducting interviews, I assumed that development experts would be able to provide insight into how women's empowerment is defined and operationalized in development. However, interviews revealed the complexity and multi-level system that international development is and how women's empowerment gets operationalized and defined is influenced by many actors across these levels. Interviewing a more diverse group of individuals across these levels may have provided further insight into the process of how women's empowerment becomes defined and operationalized in development.

Another limitation was only being able to interview one person from a local NGO. Many participants worked with larger-scale development organizations and it could have benefitted my research to have a more representative sample of individuals from smaller-scale organizations or NGOS to compare understandings and approaches to women's empowerment.

Despite limitations, talking to development experts about how they understand women's empowerment, the involvement of beneficiaries in project design, and how women's empowerment gets measured, brings to light the work that is being done to improve the situation of women in the Global South. Interviews also highlighted the shifts that are beginning to happen within the international development system to bring beneficiaries into the conversation of project design.

CONCLUSION

The intent of this research was to provide insight into how development organizations define and operationalize the term “women’s empowerment,” as well as how it is measured. I also wanted to gain insight into if and how organizations involve beneficiaries in designing and implementing projects. Interviewing development experts answered these questions, but also demonstrated that answers were not simple and straightforward. There are many factors that play a role such as the organization one work’s with, funding, and context.

The findings demonstrate that women’s empowerment cuts across many dimensions and is approached in various ways in development. Interviews with development experts have provided definitions of the concept that demonstrate that there are similarities among the understandings of women’s empowerment. They also highlight how many indicators and approaches are taken to empower women in the Global South. It is still unclear exactly how development organizations set indicators for women’s empowerment and the process that is taken, but participants shared valuable insight into how projects get created that provides a starting point to investigate.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me about your background in international development.
    a. How did you get involved?
    b. How long have you been working in the field?
    c. What countries or regions have you focused on?
2. What work have you done in development that has focused on women and/or women's empowerment?
3. How do you define "women's empowerment" in the context of development?
    a. If relevant, how does the organization you work for define it?
4. What indicators are used for initiatives focused on empowering women?
5. When you design and implement development projects that focus on empowering women, what results are you looking for?
6. How do you know a project that is targeting women's empowerment was "successful"?
    a. Are there certain measurement tools that you utilize?
7. Tell me about a project that was "unsuccessful."
    a. Describe, if you will, what went wrong or what should have been done but wasn't.
    b. In your opinion, what makes a project successful?
    c. What must be there to identify the project as a success?
8. In what ways, if at all, do you involve the people and groups you are working with?
    a. If you involve them, are you only involving women? Why or why not?
9. Are there any reports or documents that you are able to share with me that might be beneficial in understanding how development organizations make sense of and create projects around women's empowerment?
10. Is there anything else that you believe is important to know that I have failed to ask about?