

From little things big things grow: measuring women's empowerment in agriculture

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Five years ago, under the shade of a Kachere tree in rural Malawi, a woman named Grace told me a story. It was a story of prolonged drought. Having nowhere to turn for advice, she felt a heaviness watching crops fail not just in her own small garden, but also in her neighbours' and then the whole village. Her household was not alone in experiencing daily food shortages. With no way of making a stable income, Grace struggled to meet her family's basic needs, let alone being able to purchase the tools, seeds and fertiliser needed to grow food. Traditional views on what a woman's role should be further limited her access to training, credit and markets that could enable her to change the situation.

Grace's story of food insecurity was shared by almost 40,000 rural women farmers working with CARE as part of the five year [Women's Empowerment: Improving Resilience, Income and Food Security](#) (WE-RISE) program. Funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and implemented in Malawi, Ethiopia and Tanzania, WE-RISE was designed to improve women farmers' productivity and profitability through empowering them to engage in more equitable agriculture systems.

My work affords me the opportunity and privilege to exchange stories with women like Grace – but it also requires me to grapple with questions on how best to measure the extent to which women like Grace are, or are not, benefitting as a result of our agricultural programming. There are no simple answers, with debate continuing among policy-makers and practitioners on how to define and meaningfully measure women's empowerment within agricultural systems.

With this in mind, CARE, together with our evaluation partner, TANGO International, constructed a Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) modelled after the original IFPRI [Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index \(WEAI\)](#). CARE's WEI incorporates all of the WEAI dimensions, but also integrates factors that, based on our experience and analysis, are critical measures of women's empowerment, including women's mobility, political participation, self-confidence and attitudes towards household labour and gender-based violence.

Like the WEAI, CARE's WEI measures women's engagement in agriculture over five areas: production, resources, income, leadership and time allocation. A woman is considered empowered if she fulfils the conditions required by the index in at least four out of five domains. In addition to tracking the nature of empowerment, the index measures women's empowerment relative to the men in their households providing an insight to daily gender dynamics. CARE's WEI also emphasises the importance of complementary qualitative inquiry with data collected through household surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods has enabled us to more fully explain the underlying causes of women farmers' low productivity and the social changes needed to achieve their full potential as individuals and producers.

As a practitioner, the true value of a tool like this lies in the individual indicators themselves, which can provide information on the areas of greatest need and types of interventions required. In Grace's case, we learnt that when it comes to agriculture in Malawi, women are twice as disempowered as men. We learnt the largest gaps between men and women exist when it comes to speaking in public, managing domestic and productive workloads, and decision-making power on credit and land. Our program was already targeting these issues, but with these results we realised we needed to place greater emphasis on engaging with men and boys to change social norms at the household level. To address the top constraints to empowerment identified by the index, we developed targeted strategies including men's outreach story-telling and drama groups, and financial literacy and leadership training through women's savings groups.

But what does all this mean for Grace? Well, measuring women's empowerment matters. Our experience

shows that measuring women's empowerment can generate real-time information that improves the ability to deliver a successful program. We've all heard the phrase, 'what gets measured, gets done', and the index proves that women's empowerment *can* be measured in a tangible way, showing where women are becoming – or struggling to become – empowered. This means practitioners can be proactive in deciding what action should be taken to move the index further towards empowerment. Program managers are more likely to reflect on quantitative results and by identifying where women's power relative to men is low, they can take power imbalances into account and contribute to efforts to change it – thereby improving the situation and empowering women like Grace. In the context of results-based management, where quantitative indicators play a key role in assessing success, the index ensures that changes in the wellbeing of women like Grace and the process of social transformation for her family and community, are assessed as being central to that success. The index provides a flexible tool that obliges both donors and practitioners to measure (and therefore value) changes in women's empowerment as well as agricultural productivity.

Of course there are also challenges in applying such an index. The survey modules are heavy with agricultural terms and gender concepts often unfamiliar to both local researchers and project participants; significant effort must be spent contextualising it to be effective. This in turn raises the challenge of building in-country capacity; local researchers need to be confident in their knowledge of both the project and agricultural and gender concepts. The survey is also time intensive; it takes approximately two hours to interview both the primary male and female head of each household plus another two hours for the qualitative interview. Combining the time required, the skill needed and a potentially large sample size means the index can be costly to apply.

When I visited Grace last year, she told me life had changed since we first met:

I have found an easier life. With money borrowed from my savings group I started a business selling tomatoes and slowly made profit. Now I borrow and pay back my loans. I bought a set of scales so no one can cheat me. Women in my savings group encouraged me to speak and now I want to talk more and more! I'm making decisions myself – I voted for the candidate I wanted at the last election. Do I think I'm empowered? Yes! I have skills to make money for the family...when death comes and takes the husband away I will survive. I know what to do now...rather than relying on a husband where you die twice when the husband dies.

Back at my desk, the index tells Grace's story through numbers. As well as improvement across standard agricultural program indicators such as productivity, dietary diversity, income, savings and agricultural skills, the index showed she was also: 20 per cent more likely to make household decisions about income and expenditure; 15 per cent more likely to make decisions about the sale or purchase of household and farm assets; 30 per cent more confident speaking in public about issues facing women; and she experienced an increase in her freedom of movement, being 40 per cent less likely to ask permission from her husband to visit friends or travel to the market or health clinic. By the end of the program Grace had achieved the index conditions in all of the domains considered relevant for women to succeed in their agricultural endeavours.

Grace's story puts a warm face to advocacy that closing the gender gap between men and women in agriculture is critical to lifting the heavy burden of poverty in rural areas – and now we can also generate data to support this.

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