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Victoria Asekomeh-Ojuri

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*We Adapted SDG5 Because Subgoals of SDG5 Are Not Relevant to Us: Understanding Women's Economic Empowerment from Asian Stakeholder Perspectives*

By

Victoria Asekomeh-Ojuri  
MPH

Hubert Department of Global Health

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Kathryn M. Yount  
Committee Chair

---

Erin R. Johnson  
Committee Member

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By

Victoria Asekomeh-Ojuri  
B.S. Biology  
Oakwood University  
2001

Thesis Committee Chair: Kathryn M. Yount, Ph.D.

An abstract of  
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
Rollins School of Public Health of Emory University  
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2023

## **Abstract**

*We Adapted SDG5 Because Subgoals of SDG5 Are Not Relevant to Us: Understanding Women's Economic Empowerment from Asian Stakeholder Perspectives*

By Victoria Asekomeh-Ojuri

**Background:** Globally, women face many challenges to reaching economic parity with men. Women's economic empowerment is cited as the most direct means towards economic gender parity. This secondary analysis aims to better understand women's economic empowerment in an Asian specific setting versus conventional Western-oriented definitions in hopes of improving context specific understandings of women's economic empowerment in other context specific settings using culturally appropriate understandings.

**Methods:** Team members from the parent study recruited 40 individuals and conducted 21 interviews from six of the 18, 50x2030 initiative eligible Asian countries including Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam, with the Philippines later added to replace Myanmar representing. In-country stakeholders were purposefully selected to maximize diverse perspectives and represented 10 governmental entities and 11 civil society organizations and/or research institutions. Semi-structured interview guides were used to ask questions about institutional priorities and challenges and successes related to women's economic empowerment data use. Grounded Theory Methodology was used to perform a secondary analysis of data to elicit themes around stakeholder understandings of women's economic empowerment in their context specific settings.

**Results:** The analysis and resulting frameworks and theory identified five stakeholder priorities: 1) the burden of unpaid labor in women's economic empowerment; 2) financial decision making towards women's economic empowerment; 3) access to economic resources and opportunities; 4) empowering employment towards income generation; and 5) increased labor force percentages towards economic participation. Two Asian context-specific women's economic empowerment frameworks were also identified: 1) contextual modifiers to the empowerment process and 2) understanding the impact of empowerment. Lastly, a theory of stakeholder understanding was developed to explain stakeholder understandings of women's empowerment in their context-specific settings.

**Conclusion:** More similarities versus differences were found in Asian stakeholder priorities and understandings of women's economic empowerment when compared to conventional Western-derived understanding of women's economic empowerment. This is attributed to many factors including the significant influence international organizations play in defining measures and prioritizing women's empowerment agendas as well as the positionality of in-country stakeholders to international organizations in employment and education.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background and Rationale

Globally, women face several gender-related barriers to economic parity with men (Buvinić & O'Donnell, 2019). This economic disparity also informs women's ability to accumulate wealth, resulting in poorer health outcomes for not just women, but for their children, communities, and countries globally (*Global Gender Gap Report 2021*, n.d.). In the last few decades, women's empowerment (WE) is seen as the pathway to gender equality, and as such, has become a catch phrase on the world stage and a rallying point for many global health and development programs. The United Nations (UN) even dedicated one of its 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) to further efforts to improve women's empowerment, with SDG 5.7 specifically targeting women's economic empowerment.

The World Bank defines [women's] economic empowerment as "... *the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.*" (Fox & Romero, n.d.) While this definition of women's economic empowerment is used by public health practitioners in the creation, implementation and evaluation of global health initiatives, a universal, standardized definition, conceptualization, and measurement of empowerment are still very much debated. This lack of consensus has become a problem in global health. These differing conceptualizations, understandings, and definitions have led to the development of an array of non-comparable, and potentially psychometrically inadequate indicators of women's economic empowerment. These indicators, in turn, may contribute to programs, which claim to empower women economically, but may fail to translate into transformative and sustainable economic empowerment for women at micro and macro levels across countries. An increased awareness of how women's economic

empowerment is understood, especially in more culturally and contextually informed ways, is a necessary step to developing valid indicators that better assess programs. Then, empowerment efforts that facilitate authentic empowerment processes will be more easily identified and utilized, leading to better health outcomes for women, children, families, communities, and nations globally.

### **Problem Statement**

The complexity and multidimensionality of women's economic empowerment makes it difficult to conceptualize, to quantify and to measure. Conventional working definitions of women's economic empowerment used in many global health interventions are adapted from Western-centered epistemologies. There are gaps in conceptualizations and understandings that are grounded in local knowledge, values, and understandings. Currently, conventional measures and indicators around WEE prioritize Euro-centric values, priorities, and beliefs (Carrasco-Miró, 2022; Kurtiş et al., 2016; Porter, 2013; Seppälä, 2016). So, while they may begin to capture WEE in culturally similar settings—they both often miss and may even harm populations when they are used as a standard in culturally different settings (Carrasco-Miró, 2022; Kurtiş et al., 2016; Porter, 2013; Seppälä, 2016). Further, current knowledge and practice of WEE promote top-down dynamics from academics and administrators (in ivory towers) over grassroots approaches utilized by public health professionals working directly with populations in context specific ways.

### **Purpose Statement**

A consensus in the literature is apparent that women's [economic] empowerment is a process (Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, n.d.; Mosedale, 2005; Stromquist, 2015). Some also argue it to be an outcome, quantifiable and thus measurable using indicators. The widely conventional

definition taken from the World Bank centers this belief as it condenses the duality of empowerment from process and outcome into mostly outcome—a static measurement. While the indicators used to measure economic outcomes are expressed easily using quantitative data, they fail to capture the equally important, more nuanced processes of empowerment that qualitative data can capture more readily. Additionally, this mostly quantitative nature of current WEE indicators also fails to capture the contextual (i.e., cultural and temporal) nature of empowerment.

Thus, only when knowledge and understanding of women’s economic empowerment is centered in context-relevant beliefs and measured using indicators prioritized and valued by the population they seek to empower, can the process of empowerment reclaim what is currently missing—outcomes that truly capture what it is intended to measure—authentic processes of women’s economic empowerment (Kabeer, 2005).

### **Research Question**

This project addresses the problem of insufficient local knowledge informing our understanding of women’s economic empowerment. Specifically, this project employs secondary analysis of stakeholder interviews to explore their views and understanding around women’s economic empowerment within their specific Asian context. I will use Grounded Theory Methodology to identify authentic or contextualized definitions and conceptualizations of women’s economic empowerment in their specific cultural context (Charmaz, 2020; *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2023). I will iteratively analyze the data to formulate a theory around similarities and differences between stakeholder understanding and conventional Western-centered understanding of women’s economic empowerment. This theory of a more contextually informed understanding of women’s economic empowerment is what I hope will

begin to address the gap in literature around identifying contextually relevant indicators of women's economic empowerment. Only when empowerment is understood and measured by indicators that reflect the knowledge, beliefs, and realities of populations, can they begin to capture and assess both the process and outcomes of women's economic empowerment in contextually relevant ways. Women themselves must participate fully in development processes, including as stakeholders to conceptualize and measure women's empowerment, to realize gender equality through women's empowerment (Kabeer, 2005).

### **Significance Statement**

New insights gained from this project will contribute to reducing the knowledge gap around local understandings of women's economic empowerment, especially in contextually similar settings. Identifying stakeholder values and beliefs about WEE in Asia will introduce other ways of understanding, prioritizing, and thinking of economic empowerment—especially when working in similar settings. I believe the data that emerges will help to further fuel the conversation and support the call for more culturally relevant, contextually specific research, data, and knowledge of women's economic empowerment from local perspectives in indigenous spaces.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Women's economic empowerment is a direct path towards gender equality, inclusive economic growth and poverty eradication (*Women Empowerment*, 2006). As such, the United Nations is committed to promoting “women's ability to secure decent jobs, accumulate assets, and influence institutions and public policies determining growth and development.” (pg.2) Further, UN Women states, “higher incomes, better access to and control over resources, and

greater security, including protection from violence” (pg. 3) is the aim of women’s economic empowerment (*Women Empowerment*, 2006). As such, many global health and development programs are guided and informed by this understanding of women’s economic empowerment.

As support increases for women’s [economic] empowerment measures, critiques about the sustainability of its programs and transformational nature of its practices are equally necessary. Lack of consensus around definitions, conceptualizations and understandings for women’s economic empowerment are increasingly problematic. Psychometrically inadequate indicators are the result, causing poor measurements hampering efforts to find the causes and consequences of low empowerment (Malhotra et al., n.d.) and assessing the impact of social policies around empowerment (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005; Richardson, 2018a). Thus, more researchers are calling for decolonizing women’s empowerment to decenter Western epistemologies and values currently defining women’s economic empowerment understandings and interventions (Seppälä, 2016). Additionally, more relevant measures of women’s economic empowerment—derived from decolonizing efforts that gather qualitative data from local stakeholders—is needed (Carrasco-Miró, 2022; Pereznieto & Taylor, 2014; Richardson, 2018b).

Women’s economic empowerment cannot be understood, defined, and evaluated using one-size fits all measurements. Creating frameworks and indicators relevant to non-Western cultures and contexts requires centering and prioritizing non-Western understandings (Carrasco-Miró, 2022).

### **Conventional Understandings of Women’s Economic Empowerment**

While women’s empowerment does not have a universally accepted definition, the secondary analysis of women’s empowerment studies conducted by Kabeer (1999) is often cited and utilized to this end. “Women's empowerment is the process by which those who have been

denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer, 1999b) pg. 437. Kabeer further explains empowerment as a process of change, prefaced with the journey from disempowerment or denial of choices to empowerment, or “the ability to make choices” (Kabeer, 1999c) pg. 437. This ability to exercise choice is comprised of three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. Resources include access and future claims to material, human and social resources. Agency includes multiple aspects of decision making, including the ability to define and act on goals and the sense of “power within” that gives meaning, motivation, and definition to goals. Achievements are “well-being outcomes” pg. 438. Kabeer (1999) concludes that these three dimensions of choice are inseparable in determining the meaning and validity of an empowerment indicator.

### **Critique of Women’s Empowerment**

Kabeer’s (1999) work is seminal, providing a solid framework for context- specific conceptualizations of women’s empowerment. Having said that, my only concern with this paper has to do with the indices used in evaluating Kabeer’s theoretical, framework. Indicators Kabeer employed were generated from the UNDP’s gender-disaggregated Human Development Index as well as its Gender Empowerment (GEM) index, rather than contextually determined indices. While it may be argued that these indicators were customized by the various countries who utilized them, and the impossibility of creating multiple valid context derived indicators for such a study is prohibitive—the very nature and origin of these indices are reminiscent of her warning against outsider values. Kabeer herself states that “any attempt to predict at the outset of an intervention precisely how it will change women’s lives, without some knowledge of ways of *‘being and doing’* which are realizable and valued by women in that context, runs into the danger of prescribing the process of empowerment and thereby violating its essence, which is to

enhance women's capacity for self-determination.” (pg. 462) If the being and doing are not authentic, relevant, and valuable to the context used, is that also a violation of the essence of women’s empowerment?

Carrasco-Miro (2020) takes this idea of “being and doing” further, discussing developmental approaches to women’s economic empowerment using personal experience “working as a feminist economist in an international development organization in Guatemala” (Carrasco-Miró, 2022) pg. 773. While this study draws on economic patterns within Central American contexts, valuable insights can be gained. According to Carrasco-Miró, “women’s economic empowerment cannot be understood from the single goal of material affluence, paid labor, the autonomy to make choices, and gender equality, in isolation from a more comprehensive notion of the economy and female emancipation” (pg. 15). As women’s economic empowerment understandings differ between cultures and contexts, so must its measures. This idea is demonstrated by Carrasco-Miró’s discussion around paid labor. She argues, getting women into paid labor and agency of women in decision making are fundamental prerequisites for women’s economic empowerment. This concept assumes paid labor empowers women, and greater access to, and control over, assets and resources will translate to economic independence and freedom of choice in ways that reduce marginalization and male oppression (i.e., closing the gender gap). This concept also assumes first-world bias in the assuming women’s access to paid labor represents “autonomy, choice, and self-esteem for people otherwise trapped by home, culture, or tradition” (Carrasco-Miró, 2022) pg. 773. These implicit assumptions about the social nature of paid labor reflect privileged, Western experiences. Paid labor has very different realities with many women of the Global South experiencing exploitation, dispossession, and structural disempowerment. Thus, while much attention has been

given to empowerment indicators such as unpaid labor, women in non-Western settings have not been considered enough (Carrasco-Miró, 2022).

Finally, Kurtis et. al. (2016) analysis of Dutt, Grabe, and Castro's (2015) research on implications of market participation for Maasai women's empowerment attempts to apply a decolonial feminist psychology analysis to the topic of empowerment (Kurtiş et al., 2016). Their analysis acknowledges Dutt, et. al.'s rejection of a one-size-fits-all approach, in favor of emphasizing cultural dimensions of women's experiences that most conventional interventions tend to overlook (Kurtiş et al., 2016). Utilizing a strategy to normalize patterns which otherwise might be considered abnormal under conventional Western frames, allowed novel cultural models of economic activity to be studied resulting in new understandings of women's economic empowerment (Kurtiş et al., 2016). Acknowledging the limitations of both Dutt, et. al. and their own analysis, Kurtis, et. al, cautions these results are tentative and need additional replication in future studies before these findings should be used to provide guidance for decolonizing conventional approaches to empowerment in development practice (Kurtiş et al., 2016).

Kurtis, et. al, conclude "that neoliberal interventions to promote empowerment and well-being in Majority-World or Global South spaces (i) may cause harm by depriving people of environmentally afforded connection and (ii) reproduce historical and ongoing forms of (neo)colonial domination in ways that are inconsistent with the broader empowerment of humanity in general" (Kurtiş et al., 2016) pg. 389. Individualism, a Western understanding is considered the natural standard of being, even in non-Western settings, and empowerment is the expansion of individual capacity(ies) and free exercise of personal choice. "Such models cause harm to the extent that they overlook the ecological features of everyday realities in Majority-World settings. These interventions seek to provide people with resources to overcome their

assumed cultural “deprivation” to achieve optimal well-being (Mohanty, 2003) pg. 389. Promotion of these ways of being induce people to forgo assurances of environmentally afforded connection for the pursuit of individual self-expression promises of individual fulfillment (Kurtiş et al., 2016). Harm also results in reflecting and reproducing forms of colonialism by domination and appropriation, including gendered practices of the domestic household, racial violence, and exploitative economic arrangements (Carrasco-Miró, 2022). “These forms of violence enable a privileged global minority to achieve the individualist experience of empowerment and abstraction from context associated with dominant forms ways of being, but at the cost of disabling and disempowering the larger part of humanity (Kurtiş et al., 2016) pg. 390.

While ill-fitting definitions, understandings, and measurements of women’s economic empowerment are, at best, represented as minor inconveniences, design flaws, or study limitations—Kabeer (1999), Carrasco-Miró (2022), and Kurtiş et al., (2016) demonstrate that the result is far more than minor. Failure to prioritize contextual understandings of women’s economic empowerment and to capture authentic, relevant ways of being and doing may hinder the very process of women’s economic empowerment and may harm those for whom the interventions are intended to help.

### **Study Relevance**

The need for culturally relevant, context specific understandings and measurements of women’s economic empowerment is not novel (Mosedale, 2005; Seppälä, 2016; Sharaunga et al., 2019). Still most of the conventional and current measures and indices around women’s economic empowerment are centered in Western-epistemologies prioritizing Western values (Richardson, 2018a, 2018b). Few studies including Malhotra, et al., 2002 and Schuler, et al.,

2010 have attempted customizing or eliciting local, context specific understandings of women's economic empowerment based on conventionally derived standards and measures (Malhotra et al., n.d.; Schuler et al., 2010), even fewer that actually developed local definitions, measures and indices for women's empowerment. Thus, the need for more culturally relevant, context-specific understandings is missing from current literature.

Insights gained from this project will contribute to reduction of the knowledge gap around local explanations of women's economic empowerment. Identifying stakeholder values about women's economic empowerment in Asia will contribute to better definitions—especially when working in similar settings. The emerging data will bolster the conversation for contextually specific research and knowledge of women's economic empowerment from local perspectives in indigenous spaces. It is when empowerment indicators reflect the experience and values of populations, can they truly assess both the process and outcomes of women's economic empowerment in meaningful ways (Kabeer, 2005).

## **METHODS**

### **Overview**

A secondary analysis of interviews was conducted to explore stakeholder understandings of women's economic empowerment within a general Asian context. Grounded Theory Methodology was used to identify unique conceptualizations of women's economic empowerment and provide possible explanations for these understandings (Charmaz, 2017, 2020; *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2023). Similarities and differences between ideas of women's economic empowerment were elicited by comparing United Nations measures and priorities on economic empowerment (*Economic Empowerment*, n.d.) against those of stakeholders, to develop a more contextually informed conceptualization of women's economic

empowerment (Figure 1), that centered local voices (Carrasco-Miró, 2022; Kurtiş et al., 2016; Seppälä, 2016).

### **Study Settings**

Central, Southern and Southeastern Asian countries that were eligible for inclusion in the 50x2030 initiative were identified for this study. The 50x2030 initiative is a partnership between the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to increase the production, analysis, interpretation, and application of data from 50 low and lower middle-income countries in the agricultural sector. (*About / 50 by 2030*, 2019) Eighteen eligible countries were identified for the stakeholder interview process and then prioritized based on established connections between members of the research team, in-country institutional partners, and in-country stakeholders. Six countries were finally selected and included Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. The Philippines was added later to replace Myanmar when the in-country political solution proved difficult to continue stakeholder interviews. (Yount et al., 2022)

### **Study Sample**

In-country participants were purposefully selected to maximize diverse perspectives across three sectors of government, civil society organizations, and multilateral and/or research institutions. A recruitment list, then, was compiled based on recommendations from team members of the parent study who were familiar with in-country local contexts. Snowballing also was used to augment lists of potential participants. Governmental agencies working with national statistical offices and related ministries were targeted, focusing on stakeholders involved in data collection and use of statistics related to women's empowerment. Two pan-Asian institutional perspectives were included also. Team members from the parent study recruited 40 eligible individuals

identified, via email, and 21 stakeholder interviews were completed, representing 10 governmental entities and 11 civil society organizations and/or research institutions. (Table 1)

<b>Table 1. Number of Stakeholder Participants and Interviews Completed</b>				
<b>Country</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Government Agencies</b>	<b>Civil Society Organizations</b>	<b>Multilateral/Research Institutions</b>
Bangladesh	4	1	1	2
India	4	2	2	0
Myanmar	2	1	1	0
Nepal	1	1	0	0
Philippines	2	2	0	0
Uzbekistan	2	0	0	2
Vietnam	4	3	1	0
Pan-Asia	2	0	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>

### **Study Instruments and Fieldwork**

Semi structured interview guides focused on women’s empowerment and current and planned use and collection of data related to women’s empowerment. Four major topics around women’s economic empowerment were covered. These topics included priority women’s empowerment topics, current data collection on women’s empowerment, integration (of metric) into existing surveys, and other stakeholder priorities.

The semi-structured interview guide included an introduction, topical questions, and a closing discussion. As part of the introduction, survey respondents were introduced to the four

major discussion topics. These topics solicited their personal understanding of women's empowerment, how data was collected and utilized in their respective countries, their views on what women's empowerment indicators are priority in their work, and finally, about integration of a women's empowerment metric into existing surveys. These major topical sections utilized varying numbers of open-ended questions and corresponding probes. The priority women's empowerment topic consisted of one open-ended question, current data collection on women's empowerment included seven open-ended questions with varying number of follow-up probes for each respective question. Introduction of (metric) into existing surveys comprised of four open-ended questions also with varying follow-up probes. The discussion guide's closing section covered the topic around other priorities of stakeholders and asked one open-ended question to close the interview.

Team members conducted semi structured interviews between December 2020 and April 2021 virtually, using Zoom video conferencing. All interviews were conducted in English except for one, which the stakeholder requested Vietnamese translation—provided by an International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) team member fluent in Vietnamese and English. All interviews were digitally recorded via Zoom features, and recordings were professionally transcribed using a transcription service. For the Vietnamese and English interview, only the English portions were transcribed. Random segments of transcriptions were compared to their original recording to verify transcription quality.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Secondary data analysis was conducted using the Grounded Theory Method (Charmaz, 2017; *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2023). De-identified transcripts were reviewed, and block coded into a matrix for women's economic empowerment. A working definition of women's

economic empowerment then was developed using data from transcripts to adapt and contextualize Naila Kabeer's (1999) widely cited definition of empowerment from her seminal paper (Kabeer, 1999a). Themes were also iteratively identified, defined, and key quotes recorded with other relevant data such as women's economic empowerment codes. Complex coding commenced using these codes to mark transcripts line-by-line, while simultaneously refining the codebook to better reflect emerging data. This second matrix was then sub-analyzed for codes about definitions and understanding of women's economic empowerment to inform the emerging theory of more local definitions of women's economic empowerment.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The Emory Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that the parent study met the criteria for exemption (Emory IRB ID: 00001530). The ethics application was submitted with a waiver of documentation of consent, though informed verbal consent was still obtained from participants at the beginning of each interview.

The survey was fielded in December 2020 through April of 2021 by study investigators of WEMNS: The Women's Empowerment Survey for National Statistical Systems, through a partnership between the International Food Policy Research Institute, Emory University, the World Bank Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS), and the University of Oxford. The present analysis was determined to be IRB-exempt because it is an analysis of secondary data where all data were de-identified prior to analysis.

## **RESULTS**

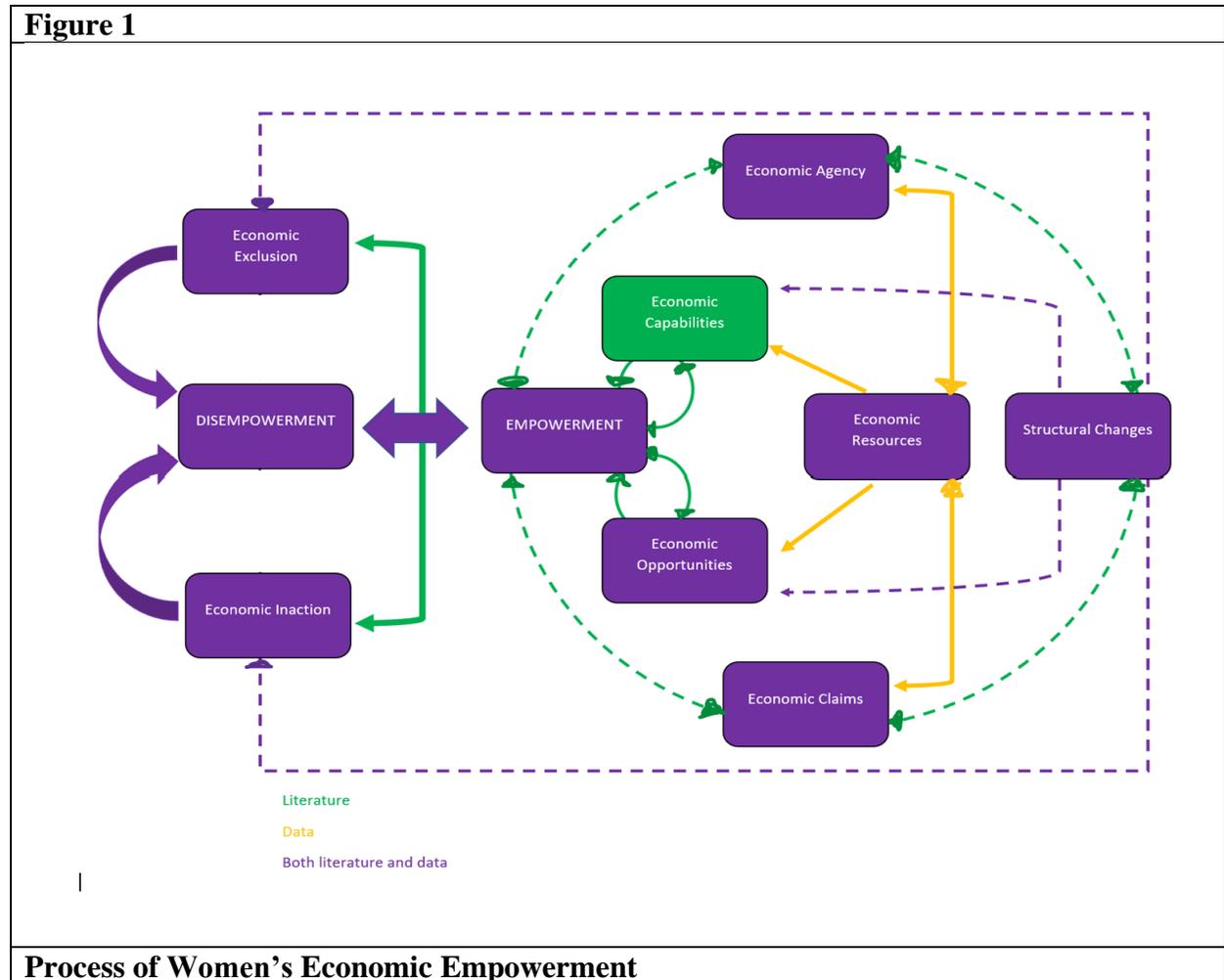
### **Overview**

For this project, my working definition of women's economic empowerment is based on Kabeer's (1999) definition of women's empowerment adapted to incorporate understandings

from stakeholder interviews around economic empowerment. Thus, I define women's economic empowerment as a process of transformation for individual women and collectives whereby they move from experiences of economic exclusion and inaction to a place of increased economic opportunities and capabilities. Economic capabilities refer to enhanced access to and claims on new economic resources and associated increases in economic agency (Kabeer, 1999a). This definition informed subsequent analysis and completion of this project's three objectives. The first objective sought to uncover values, beliefs, and priorities of Asian stakeholders regarding women's economic empowerment within their specific context. Next, emergent themes from data analysis of stakeholder interviews were identified to better understand similarities and differences between Asian stakeholders understanding of women's economic empowerment and conventional western-centered understandings. Last, a framework explaining similarities and or differences between Asian stakeholder understandings and western understandings of women's economic empowerment was developed.

A framework informed by Kabeer (1999) and data from stakeholder interviews was also developed. (Figure 1) The five stakeholder priorities represent a form or indicator of either women's economic empowerment or disempowerment. The process of moving from disempowerment to empowerment is not linear but bidirectional and informed by structural changes often effecting economic access and extending to income generation and labor force participation. Economic disempowerment is seen widely in two ways—economic exclusion and or economic inaction. Forms of economic exclusion in the data are unpaid labor, and labor force participation. Economic inaction was seen in lack of income generation with employment. Economic exclusion affects economic inaction and visa versa.

Economic empowerment is informed by economic agency and claims which both inform economic resources that help increase economic capabilities and economic opportunities. This is best demonstrated in two additional stakeholder priorities. Financial decision making and access to economic opportunities increased due to improved economic agency and claim, leading to increased economic opportunities and capabilities.



**Process of Women's Economic Empowerment**  
*Notes to Figure 1: framework informed by Kabeer (1999), Sen (1995) and data from stakeholder interviews.*

Women's economic empowerment values, beliefs and priorities of Asian stakeholders interviewed centered around measures and indicators of women's economic empowerment.

These included unpaid labor or care economy, decision making, access to economic

opportunities, employment or income generation, and labor force participation. Emergent themes from interviews centered on individual- and group-level impact of empowerment and how identity can modify empowerment impacts at these levels. This aspect of the project proved to have more overlap than differences when compared to conventional western understandings of women's economic empowerment. Further analysis of project data demonstrates that this similarity of Asian stakeholder understandings of women's economic empowerment with conventional western-centered ideas stem from the immense influence international agencies wield in these Asian contexts—informing in-country policies, laws, and priorities, as well as national budgets, funding, and stakeholder jobs and education.

## **Stakeholder Priorities**

### ***Burden of Unpaid Labor in Women's Economic Empowerment***

Five major stakeholder priorities around economic empowerment emerged in relation to stakeholder values and beliefs regarding women's empowerment: unpaid labor or care economy, decision making, access, income generation and labor force participation. Unpaid labor or “care economy” was mentioned by many stakeholders. Stakeholders agreed that it was a barrier to women's economic empowerment that needed to be addressed. (Figure 1) One participant stated,

...when people ask me about the problem in terms of this women's empowerment, I always say it's the care economy ...(Philippines, Government)

Another stakeholder personalized the importance of the care economy when describing a one of her own experiences,

...other indicators that we can do better is care economy. I was a victim of the care economy. I didn't work for almost a year because I had to take care of my kids. I was lucky, but I would say that not all women here in the Philippines have the same fortune

that I have. I have connections and a PhD. I had all sort of options, but there are some women that are affected by this care economy whose experiences were not as forgiving.

(Philippines, Government)

Still, while they believed unpaid labor to be an important aspect of economic empowerment that needed to be addressed, many stakeholders mentioned difficulties addressing this barrier due to social norms. According to one individual,

Many people don't see this as unpaid labor. They see it as their duty as a wife and as a mother. Women have a certain role that is more genderized than they will disclose. It's so engrained in the gender and the roles that it's cultural. (India, Civil Society)

They further summed up many of their peer's sentiment by giving examples of unpaid labor and discussing how it impacts women,

I think there's always been things that keep girls from being empowered and moving ahead, like looking after siblings and collecting water and always helping with cooking and all of that that continues to play into why girls can't be in school. I think that all that still exists, (India, Civil Society)

Unpaid labor or care economy is a concern for many stakeholders interviewed and affects women's ability to be active in formal employment leading to income generation and labor market participation. While often considered a gender and cultural norm for women to carry most familial responsibilities, many stakeholders mostly cited this concern without providing specific remedies or recommendations to address this issue.

### ***Financial Decision Making Towards Women's Economic Empowerment***

Decision making, I defined based on Kabeer (1999) as an outcome of women's economic empowerment where individuals and groups can make decisions regarding their personal

finances and economic opportunities as well as their personal lives and physical bodies at any level of influence (Kabeer, 1999a). While this was the second most commonly occurring theme in stakeholder interviews, examples of the types of decisions varied. One participant mentioned the importance of owning, controlling, and managing assets, “Asset ownership is very important. How do you control them? How do you manage them? Who controls? Who manages?” (Philippines, Government) Another discussed the importance of decision making around economic opportunities--asking, “Do you take the decision on how much produce to retain or sell?” Similarly, “Do you take decisions on how to spend money from the farm?” (India, Government). Still another spoke in relation to decision making about one’s physical body and personal life stating,

I can give birth to a child. My husband cannot give birth to a child. I have the right to decide if I should give birth to a child or not. That’s mine 100 percent. It’s not 50 percent or 20 percent or 40 percent. It’s 100 percent that I can decide if I need to have a child or not even if I have to. As a decision maker, I can do that. (Nepal, Government)

Most participants agreed that while important, decision making in any aspect informing women’s economic empowerment was complex involving many layers, contexts, norms, and mitigating factors. One interviewee summed it up well when stating,

That's very complex as well, but I do not see that only looking at decision-making power—and that's also very relevant thing because, nowadays... you see that many men and women have said they will take the decision together. It's a question of looking at, very carefully, what are the opportunities, what are their rights, what are their choices. Is she really taking the decision jointly? Does she have the authority to say anything? Or are

the men coming up, saying we take the decision jointly? ...these are all complex reality.  
(Bangladesh, Civil Society)

While financial decision making is believed to be essential to women's economic empowerment by stakeholders, (Figure 1) how, when and to what degree was something that differed among the various understandings. To some, it could be solely measured by a women's financial and economic improvement while others felt it was less tangible and measured by the confidence, motivation and ability women brought to these decisions. All agreed though, that barriers and facilitators for decision making were dynamic and could change based on culture/social norms, physical location/environment, and degree of marginalization (i.e., age, marital status, education, caste, etc.).

### ***Access to Economic Resources and Opportunities***

Access to economic opportunities and resources was the next theme under stakeholder values, beliefs, and priorities. While some stakeholders identified this theme as an area of success and improvement within their individual contexts, others highlighted areas around access that remains a barrier to women's economic empowerment. (Figure 1) To sum, success was defined by access to income generating skills and labor force participation. Others deemed success less tangible, defined by a women's ability to speak up and feel confident about accessing resources and opportunities and exercising agency around personal finance. One participant summed up both the success and complexity of this theme when stating,

Women can easily access to loan or any credit program in local level, in the grassroot level, especially in my organization, we have some schemes for women to easily access a loan. Sometimes we have programs or projects to support women to start a business or expand their existing business. However, sometimes, the man, the husband is controlling

the loan money. The women cannot utilize the money, but she is still responsible to repay the loan. (Vietnam, Government)

Thus, women's economic empowerment is more than just increasing access to economic opportunities and resources. While access is important, it is also heavily reliant on decision making as well to properly inform one's empowerment process. Also, as in the case of other stakeholder priorities, this aspect is also complex and dynamic, subject to change based on other identifying features of the individuals and groups involved (i.e., social-economic, marginalizing factors).

### ***Empowering Employment Towards Income Generation***

Employment or income generation as an outcome of women's economic empowerment that increases employment opportunities and options for income generating livelihoods of women engaged in formal and or informal labor in public and or private sectors was another theme popular with stakeholders. (Figure 1) Many participants mentioned the need for women to gain employment skills as well as listed a variety of factors impacting employability and income generation for women in their respective contexts. These included educational and or skills training, rural vs urban locations, women's age, and social supports. A stakeholder summed these sentiments up when stating,

I think of since our experience has proved that it's a very integrated—everything is so intertwined and integrated if she has access to work and income but no support service. Then, also, it affects her—it slows down or sometimes it affects her empowering process as well. I think the most fundamental is that the women need basic work and income for livelihoods. (India, Civil Society)

Another, explained their perceived benefit to women's employment and income generation stating,

I think when a woman has access to regular employment income, if she has access to the basic support services, then she's able to make choice whether she wants to be a part of an organization, one organization, multiple organizations, whether she wants to be in a leadership position or not. I think those are the ones which you leave up to the woman to decide. Even if she doesn't play that leadership role, it's not going to reduce her empowerment. (India, Civil Society)

While not directly stated, an assumption that seemed to be at the heart of this stakeholder priority is that women's paid employment somehow directly translates to women's economic empowerment. While income generation may positively impact an aspect of disempowerment by potentially reducing poverty levels, economic empowerment involves much more than just managing one's poverty and is complex and dynamic—susceptible to change based on other socio-political contexts and societal norms.

### ***Increased Labor Force Percentages Towards Formal Economic Participation***

Though labor force participation was the least cited of themes identified under stakeholder priorities, it was still mentioned several times by a variety of participants. (Figure 1)

Believed to be priority by those who mentioned it, one stakeholder stated,

At this moment, I think the topmost priority for the country is having gender parity in the labor force, which is currently—for women, for female, it is currently 36 percent, which is in a stable over the last almost seven, eight years. It's not increasing, so having gender parity in the labor force is the key important area, I would say. (Bangladesh, Civil Society)

Another participant mentioned,

That's why when people ask me about the problem in terms of this women's empowerment...it's really labor force participation, whether women will participate in labor force, that's the question. (Philippines, Government)

A stakeholder summed up prevailing concerns around labor force participation when stating,

The whole labor force and participation of women in the labor force is about the informal nature of women's involvement in the economy. Women are mostly active in the informal economy, including care economy. That's why most of the women who are active in the economy don't have their contribution counted. That is one of the key areas we are focusing on for the country, a strategy to move from informal to formal economic participation. (Bangladesh, Civil Society)

Stakeholders that mentioned the need for labor force participation cited international influence and increased standing on a global stage for reasons increased labor force participation was deemed important. There was no direct link or connection made aside from United Nations prioritization for why labor force participation was important for women's economic empowerment.

### **Emergent Themes of Women's Economic Empowerment**

The second objective of this project identified emergent stakeholder themes of women's economic empowerment to determine if and what these Asian understandings share with conventional western-derived meanings. Two themes emerged in relation to this objective, *Contextual Modifiers of the Empowerment Process* or contextual modifiers, and *Understanding the Impact of Empowerment* or empowerment impact.

Contextual modifiers of women's economic empowerment increase and or decrease the empowerment effect based on the context they are found. Modifying variables affect individuals or groups of women and include vulnerability/marginalization due to sexual orientation, caste, tribe, marital status, profession, etc. Location is also a contextual modifier, referencing a women's physical environment of urban vs. rural, social norms, age, socioeconomic status, and national culture/ethnicity.

Empowerment impact refers to an outcome of empowerment where individual and groups of women are empowered in areas, they previously experienced disempowerment. These areas include unpaid labor/care economy, employment/income generation, gender-friendly infrastructure or infrastructure that is gender-responsive and friendly to individual women's' needs (i.e., safe, accessible bathrooms), nutritional security, wage parity, time in labor—often in the form of technology or innovation that reduces their time spent in types of industry and mobility. (Figure 1)

### **Contextual Modifiers of the Empowerment Process**

As stated by one stakeholder, "...all of our backgrounds are different. All of it – age plays in. Where you live plays. Caste plays in. There's a lot of things..." (India, Civil Society) These modifiers are complex and often context specific—facilitating empowerment within one context while challenging it in another. According to a participant,

I think geographical location is important as well, so women in tribal or coastal areas, those in the Northeast, those in different geographical areas. There are certain specific differences that happen to women because of these different geographies. (India, Government)

Modifiers conversely behaved differently even within the same context—acting as both a barrier and facilitator of empowerment. This is best demonstrated in where women live.

Stakeholders agree that women living in rural areas often experience less economic opportunities, decreased access, and increased social norms that challenged their empowerment. Stakeholders also acknowledged these women are especially targeted in interventions and programs, thus also increasing their likelihood of encountering empowering facilitators. To this point, a stakeholder gives an illustration,

The situation is much more difficult in the rural areas, we have more than 100,000 farmers in the country. One of the indicators is how many of them are women. Over the years, on paper, about 8 percent, sometimes it is 9 percent, but less than 10 percent of the farmers are women. When you dig deeper, these women are only farmers on paper. They are written down as the head of the farm, but their husbands or close relatives call all the shots. This also depends on the region. (Uzbekistan, Academic)

In describing the complexity of contextual modifiers on empowerment, one participant explains,

If you look at your personal life, if I look at my personal life, empowerment is a very complex issue. If you look at that empowerment framework for gender analysis, there are a number of issues there: consent, education, authority, rights, choices, opportunities, and more. (Bangladesh, Civil Society)

While some contextual modifiers can be accounted for using conventional measures and definitions, others are absent from these same measures. Additionally, those that are present often hold varying degrees of importance for the individuals and communities they measure and are defined differently between groups and regions. Thus, truly understanding what conceptual modifiers to the empowerment process are, ensuring their contextual relevance, and understanding their degree of cultural importance is invaluable. Though major differences

between stakeholder understandings and conventional definitions seemed nominal, this concept emerged as an important theme.

### **Understanding the Impact of Empowerment**

Empowerment impact is the other emergent theme identified around Asian stakeholder understanding of women's economic empowerment. One interviewee phrased the essence of their fellow stakeholder opinions concluding,

Our experience for close to five decades shows that empowerment is an indirective process. The way our members define empowerment is integrated. They organize to build collective strength and bargaining power, but with organizing there's also a need for capacity building individually. Then, when all these things come together, at a pace which the women are comfortable, it becomes an empowering process for them. A woman is then able to speak up, or she's able to demand in her own family, in the village council, in front of the trader, in front of the government officials. That is what empowerment means for them—economic freedom, freedom from hunger and starvation, ability to earn and live a life of dignity and self-respect. (India, Civil Society)

The process of economic empowerment impacts not just a women's tangible, financial wellbeing, but also her agency that informs this wellbeing. Thus, understanding the impact of the empowerment process also means understanding how this process may look in different settings, under various circumstances. Prioritizing the impact of individual and collective actualization at the same level as financial empowerment within the the process of women's economic empowerment was the greatest difference in Asian-specific versus conventional Western centric understandings.

### **Theory of Stakeholder Understanding**

The creation of the theme Stakeholder Influences is used to explain stakeholder's understanding of women's economic empowerment. Stakeholders often referenced how country policies and laws, (other more powerful) stakeholders, and empowerment interventions are significantly influenced by international agencies. International agencies such as the United Nations and World Bank are credited with not only conceptualizing and defining women's empowerment for in-country stakeholders and their respective governments using the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but also prioritizing and often dictating in-country empowerment efforts by through the control of funding and support. According to one participant,

It's all about prioritizing the areas and the sectors where data will be collected and allocation of resources that we need and having strong connections with the World Bank. There was a demand to review and to draft a strategy from the SDG's lens. The top priorities were those SDG indicators. Currently, the discussion is what the country needs to do. It's not what they can do. What needs to be done is much more important. There were lots of technical awards from various UN agencies that took place over the last few years. (Bangladesh, Civil Society)

Another interviewee explained,

Much of the funding is coming from the government side and from the other development partners, also, like NSF, the World Bank. Then FAO, ILO, they also help us with funding and with technical assistance. (Bangladesh, Government)

Additionally, many in-country stakeholders had direct links and or history with many of these same international agencies—often bringing understandings and values from these agencies into their current in-country positions. As stated by one participant,

As UNFPA person, I had the privilege of leading this strategy paper development in collaboration with the government and other stakeholders. UNFPA led in this process of convincing the government to undertake the survey that informed the paper. (Myanmar, Civil Society)

Another stakeholder detailed their relationship saying,

I was at the UNDP. Then one of the things that we worked together on was on statistics and then how we can improve it. The World Bank has repeatedly asked the government to release those estimations, but the government has never done that. Then World Bank went ahead and then collected its own data. Then the World Bank started publishing that those statistics. These statistics being published by international organizations are considered very sensitive. These statistical rankings have become big business for the government and international organizations. It's kind of a cat-and-mouse type of game.

The Human Development Index or HDI, is just like international business rankings. I was in charge of HDI at UNDP for Uzbekistan. (Uzbekistan, Academic)

Despite these international influences on in-country stakeholders understanding around women's economic empowerment, there are still calls for more contextual understandings. As stated by one interviewee, "Yeah.. when does a women really feel empowered? It's very relative. You can't have one universal or a uniform metrics." (India, Civil Society) She further explained, "It's a very relative kind of experience." (India, Civil Society) and "Empowerment for women varies from situation-to-situation, and it's very contextual." (India, Civil Society). She summed her sentiment by noting,

I find, nowadays, that development is being very commercial in the sense that we lost that image of development and very close touch of the circle of beneficiaries. You often

do you not go to them and ask them what is their need. It's our need, which we impose on people. Of course, there are some cases that that they want addressed. In general, we know the people do not have access to safe water, so we actually provide the water.

However, we often do not ask them where you want the water point to be set up so that we reduce your time burden in terms of collecting water. (Bangladesh, Civil Society)

Values, beliefs, and priorities concerning women's economic empowerment for in-country stakeholders focused on unpaid labor, decision-making, access, employment/income generation and labor force. Emergent themes in these context specific settings explaining stakeholder understanding of women's empowerment included two themes of contextual modifiers of the empowerment process and understanding the impact of empowerment. The thirteen variables that informed these themes, while not entirely overlapping with the conventional United Nations indicators for economic empowerment, displayed more similarities than differences with in-country stakeholder understandings. These close understandings were attributed to the influence international agencies have on both in-country definitions and relationships between stakeholders and the various international agencies.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Summary**

Analysis of stakeholder interviews demonstrate five major priorities about women's economic empowerment in Asian specific contexts. Stakeholders value the importance of addressing unpaid labor or "care economy" as an important part step towards empowerment. Decision making—around finances and economic opportunities, is another priority. Access to economic opportunities and resources and women's ability to gain employment to generate income are also deemed necessary for empowerment. Last, labor force participation, while

mentioned to a lesser degree, was still identified by stakeholders as important for women's empowerment within their countries.

Two themes emerged summarizing participant understandings of women's empowerment. Modifiers or variables that expand and or diminish the process of empowerment including vulnerability or marginalization from women's sexual orientation, caste, tribe, marital status, and profession emerged. Impact also emerged as a theme especially around specific aspects of empowerment including unpaid labor, employment, gender-friendly infrastructure, nutritional security, wage parity, time in labor and mobility.

Beliefs and understanding of stakeholders around women's economic empowerment proved very similar to conventional, mainstream western understandings. To explain these similarities, the theory of Stakeholder Influence was developed. Due to the influence international agencies have within stakeholder countries—influencing national priorities, programing budgets and support, local and even national understandings of women's economic empowerment are not possible. Additionally, many stakeholders interviewed had close past and current direct relationships, often in the form of employment within international agencies—also likely skewing and diminishing most local understandings of empowerment.

### **Stakeholder Priorities**

Five major priorities stakeholders identified as important for women's empowerment included aspects of “care-economies” leading to unpaid labor, decision making around personal finances, access to economic opportunities, income generation and labor force participation. These issues are believed to be valuable for women at both an individual level as well as for groups and collectives at community, regional and national levels. In analyzing stakeholder interviews, the dichotomous nature in which these aspects of empowerment were referenced was

striking. Often, these priorities were spoken of by interviewees as either having or not having. Rarely was economic empowerment, like other aspects of women's empowerment defined as a process. They were often referenced as items to be marked on a list that once completed, would allow those who have attained it to arrive at a place of empowerment. In contrast, a major critique of the utility and employment of women empowerment interventions and measures in global health and development is this very idea. Many argue that the origins of empowerment, even in western settings was born out of feminist ideology and conceptualizations where empowerment is a process rather than a destination (Kabeer, n.d.). Kabeer (1999) also defines women's empowerment as a process and while supporting more instrumentalist forms of empowerment as a means to an end towards advocacy, also advances the understanding of empowerment as a process. Thus, while beliefs of participants are valid, my criticism comes from the way these beliefs are instrumentalized and deployed.

Another aspect of discussion concerning interviewee values and beliefs around women's economic empowerment centers on the idea that money—the ability to work to generate it, is the cornerstone of economic empowerment. Many participants' concern for the five priority areas boiled down to women's ability to be paid for work, have access to jobs, gain employment and generate income. While these aspects are undoubtedly important to the empowerment process, they are a means to an end rather than just an end. Critics often cite the idea of teaching women to manage their poverty rather than addressing the issues that continue to keep them impoverished (Carrasco-Miró, 2022; Kurtiş et al., 2016; Seppälä, 2016). Studies have demonstrated the ineffectiveness and even harm of strictly income generating empowerment programs such as microfinancing—without addressing other barriers to the process of empowerment (Narayan-Parker, 2002; Sharma, 2000). Recognizing that most of the stakeholders

interviewed lack actual influence and power to effect direct change to these critiques, the way these priorities are understood and instrumentalized by participants reflects the organizations and agencies they serve.

### **Emergent Themes of Women's Economic Empowerment**

The theme of contextual modifiers when broken down, centers the identity of women in their context specific settings. Stakeholders acknowledged how a women's level of vulnerability and marginalization, her home environment (urban vs rural), social norms that govern her environment, her age, her socioeconomic status, and her culture/ethnicity—her identity, serve to either empower or disempower her. As it is context specific, it can and may change depending on the context and circumstances she finds herself. For this reason, having context specific understandings that lead to measures that can capture the varied nature of a women's identity is crucial for women's empowerment. Empowerment is not a one size fits all plan and should allow for the customization of its definition, conceptualization, and measurement in ways that honor and value the uniqueness of different experiences. This is especially important in cultural settings where local epistemologies have long been ignored in favor of western-centered ideas. If empowerment practices and measures are truly responsive to the communities and individuals they serve, then their cultural views and knowledge should shape and drive them (Chilisa et al., 2016).

The empowerment impact theme highlights aspects of empowerment stakeholders believed to be necessary for women's economic empowerment in their contexts. Addressing the issue of unpaid labor, income generation, gender-friendly infrastructure, nutritional security, wage increase, time spent in labor and women's mobility are necessary for economic empowerment. Interestingly, while it was initially assumed that concern for women's wages

centered on wage parity with men—analysis of interviews revealed that parity was less a priority than just the idea of increasing women’s income since it was assumed that most were grossly underpaid. In addition, underlying the empowerment impact theme is the stakeholder ideal that women should operate as individual financial units, not dependent on male spouse and or family members. While acknowledging my limited knowledge of local Asian cultures and practices, another critique of conventional Euro-Western paradigms is the forced adoption of non-indigenous values and beliefs. While a women’s financial independence from her spouse and family is perfectly acceptable in a variety of settings—if this ideal serve to disempower her or doesn’t align with her values, should it be used as a measure in her empowerment journey (Carrasco-Miró, 2022; Kurtiş et al., 2016).

### **Theory of Stakeholder Understanding**

Stakeholder Influence is the theory developed to explain close similarities between interviewee’s understanding of women’s economic empowerment and conventional western ideas. Acknowledging the history and ramifications of European colonization and Western imperialism throughout the globe would make it difficult to find and illicit purely local understandings—especially among stakeholders in positions so heavily influenced by international agencies. Still, the level and degree foreign agencies wield within these Asian contexts was glaring. While the term “women’s economic empowerment” no doubt has heavy western connotations, many stakeholders were unable to even explain it, thoughtless of define it without referencing United Nations Standard Development Goals and World Bank measures. This is neither a critique or indictment of stakeholders, but rather on international agencies and organizations. National agendas, programmatic budgets, and capacity support are directly informed and influenced by these international agencies. Many of the participants also are/were

employed by these same agencies, maintain close working relationships with agencies and or were trained/educated in western-centered contexts. The space and support to learn and conceptualize women's empowerment centering local knowledge and practice is non-existent, and doing so would likely not serve them within their current capacities.

### **Study Limitations**

There are a few study limitations to mention in completing this qualitative analysis. As this is an analysis of secondary data taken from a parent project with a slightly different focus. The primary study employed collection of women's empowerment data for monitoring SDG5 at in-country national and regional levels. While the interview guide utilized open-ended questions in its opening to illicit stakeholder responses about women's economic empowerment—its' focus was gathering information on data collection for women's empowerment measures. As such, the quality of data specifically related to better understanding local ideas of women's economic empowerment was limited.

Due to the nature and positions of the participants, western-oriented understandings are expected. Additionally, many of the stakeholders are 'leaders' of NGOs, from academia, and from government agencies, considered 'elites' in their own countries. Another limitation of this analysis in addition to the western bias many stakeholders possess, is the lack of grassroots views of lay women not necessarily reflected in their narratives. Possibly if this were a primary study, questions eliciting views and explanations from lay women centering local understandings of women's economic empowerment would generate richer and more specific data. Also, attempting to elicit contextual knowledge in an albeit qualitative analysis of stakeholder interviews spanning several diverse Asian contexts many be limited in the ability to capture the nuanced differences of local understandings of women's economic empowerment.

Finally, as previously mentioned, assumptions were made about local Asian beliefs, views, and practices relating to women's empowerment. I acknowledge my limited understanding of such and relied entirely on previous studies and literature to support discussions around local understandings of women's empowerment in Asian contexts.

### **Public Health Implications**

The call for decolonizing public, global health, and development and indigenizing these practices is not new. As such, implications around the lack of local understanding of women's empowerment even in non-western settings, would provide additional support for this call. More effort should be made to increase culturally responsive practices that better empower women in meaningful ways under context specific circumstances.

### **Recommendations**

Further study would be beneficial to understand better the local understandings that lay people have of women's economic empowerment. Understanding ways this concept appears in local values, practices and beliefs would be a first step. Next, understanding ways it can be instrumentalized within specific contexts. Then, better understanding how different stakeholders prioritize and value these context specific conceptualizations can provide additional clarity and guidance to current public health practice. While there should be no one size fits all approach, understanding different ways to make empowerment practices and measures relevant in various contexts will only better inform and transform current methodologies and practices.

### **Conclusion**

Western-centered understanding of women's empowerment is seen both in what stakeholders prioritize as important for women's empowerment, as well as how they understand women's empowerment in their context specific settings. These western conceptualizations in

Asian specific contexts are due to the influence international agencies have in defining, prioritizing, funding, and supporting women's empowerment efforts. This may also be attributed to the positions of privilege and standing also possessed by stakeholders. This is a major concern and critique in recent literature, as the call for decolonizing and indigenizing global health.

More space, support, and opportunities need to be created if more research is to happen to better inform ways theories and practices can be made more context specific. When more is known about ways non-western philosophies and views can inform women's economic empowerment processes and practices, relevant conceptualizations and indicators can develop to produce meaningful and sustainable empowerment in non-western settings.

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