



# Working Paper: Concepts and Measures of Agency, Empowerment, and Related Issues

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## Introduction

This paper explores the idea of empowerment and related concepts in the context of global development. It provides an overview of concepts, examples of previous measurements, and an evaluation of how effective various types of indicators have been. We hope to provide a resource that can be of use when developing surveys and other methods to assess changes in empowerment, agency, and the like. The purpose of this paper is to note promising avenues of research worth pursuing, and to suggest improvements for indicators currently in use.

In order to discuss these topics, we must first begin with a working definition of what we mean by each of them. Amartya Sen's capability approach is considered foundational in this literature; we therefore utilize his definition of agency. Agency is a person's capability to act on behalf of what he or she values, and has reason to value. According to Sen, it is intrinsically valuable and instrumentally effective at poverty alleviation (Sen 1984). A related, though not completely synonymous, concept is that of empowerment. In her overview of agency, Alkire (2005) notes the diversity of conceptions of empowerment in existing studies. Because of this, she says, in her work "no attempt was made to choose [only] one." However, we believe that empowerment is best defined in her words as "the instrumental strength of agency in the relevant spheres."

Dignity is defined in this paper as "the ability to feel important and valuable in relation to others, communicate this to others, and to be treated as such by others." (Khatib and Armenian 2010) Conversely, shame can be described as a violation of dignity. Shame is defined as a "global, painful, and devastating experience in which the self, not just [a] behavior, is painfully scrutinized and negatively evaluated... This global, negative affect is often accompanied by a sense of shrinking and being small, and by a sense of worthlessness and powerlessness." (Sabini and Silver 1997, 3)

We might be tempted to use the term "humiliation" as opposed to shame. The two are closely related, but not precisely one and the same. Hartling and Luchetta (1999) describe humiliation as "the deep dysphoric feeling associated with being, or perceiving oneself as being, unjustly degraded, ridiculed, or otherwise put down- in particular, one's identity has been demeaned or devalued." This implies that humiliation requires the influence of an outside actor to induce the feeling. We prefer to use shame here, as it refers to a person's evaluation of themselves, regardless of whether this feeling occurred through the actions of another or others. We further discuss the distinction between shame and humiliation in a later section. For now, it suffices to say that we prefer to examine indicators of shame.

## Indicators

We now turn to examples of indicators that have previously been used to measure agency and empowerment, dignity, and shame. We will then discuss the construction, measurement, and conceptual precision of each, and suggest improvements to address the issues we identify here.

### **Agency/Empowerment**

The most basic type of question regarding agency are global questions that describe a scale of empowerment, and ask respondents to place themselves on this scale. For example, Narayan and Petesch (2007) employ the 'Ladder of Power' question, as follows:

"Imagine a 10-step ladder, where at the bottom, on the first step, stand people who are completely powerless and without rights, and on the highest step, the tenth, stand those who have a lot of power and rights. On which step of the ladder are you today? And on which step were you ten years ago?"

There are several problems with questions like these. First, we do not know how respondents define "power and rights." Second, we do not know who respondents are comparing themselves to. Is it to their spouse? Their employer? Within their broader community? Do they consider each of their identities, and then take an average of their rights and powers under each? This question does not allow us to see the decision-making behind each response. Additionally, this type of question assumes constant agency across all domains, which almost certainly is not the case. For example, women might be fully empowered as wives and mothers, but excluded from the labor force. They might be empowered by the legal right to vote, but de facto disempowered because they are afraid to travel alone to the polls. Unless there is specific justification for global agency questions, multi-dimensional measures of agency are more appropriate.

One example of a dimension-specific indicator, and a measure quite commonly used across studies, are questions that ask respondents who makes household decisions regarding various domains. For example, the most recent phase of the Harvard Demographic and Health (DHS) Survey asks, "Who usually decides how the money you earn will be used: you, your husband/partner, or you and your husband/partner jointly?" Respondents may choose between the following answers: respondent, husband/partner, respondent and husband/partner jointly, someone else, or other. The question is also asked on the DHS survey in regards to money earned by the husband/partner, major household purchases, decisions about healthcare, and visits to family or relatives.

As previously noted, the question is commonly used across development surveys, and in many other domains. Respondents have been asked who makes decisions about political matters, such as voting, party affiliation, campaigning, and standing for election; marriage; religious beliefs, such as going to a place of worship, praying at

home, fasting, and attending festivals; and the education of their children, just to name a few. However, there are inherent limitations to measuring empowerment in this way.

First, not all questions asked are relevant to women's own strategic interests, but rather constrained by the requirements that they are relevant to most women, and that they vary in terms of how much say women typically have. Second, these questions only ask whether women take part in the decision making, not if they are instrumental or able to influence the outcome. Another problem is that the response does not convey whether participation brought about the desired result. Additionally, it is unclear whether, in order to be considered empowered, women must make these decisions alone, or if being a part of the decision-making process is important in and of itself. Responses to this question cannot tell us whether women who make decisions alone vary significantly from women who make decisions jointly, or if participation varies predictably by decision type, for example. Finally, these questions assume that the respondent should want agency over the domains they are asked about, and only those domains.

One way to alleviate this last problem is to utilize a follow up question that some studies have employed. After asking respondents about their level of involvement in a decision-making process, they are then asked: to what degree could they make that decision *if they wanted to*? Responses could range from to a very high degree, to a fair degree, to a small degree, or not at all. This at least provides clarity as to whether respondents are in fact disempowered, or whether they simply do not have a preference over their agency in that specific domain.

Finally, one way agency has been measured is by the Relative Autonomy Indicator (RAI). This measures "the ability of a person to act on what he or she values, to have his or her own intrinsic motivations prevail over motivations to please others or avoid punishment, for example. This indicator probes the person's own understanding of the situation and allows the respondent to easily explain the different motivations that influence activities." (Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index)  
The RAI is constructed by asking respondents whether the following motivations are always true, sometimes true, or never true in their decision-making over whatever activity area that is of interest:

1. My actions in [activity area] are because I will get in trouble with someone if I act differently
2. Regarding [activity area], I do what I do so others don't think poorly of me
3. Regarding [activity area] I do what I do because I personally think it is the right thing to do.

Following this, an index is created from a weighted sum of the responses. External coercion (acting to avoid getting into trouble) is weighted as -2; trying to please (acting so others do not think poorly of them) is weighted as -1; and own values (acting based on personal beliefs) is weighted as 3. Thus the index varies from -9 to 9, and values greater than 0 indicate that the individual is moved more by their values than by coercion or influence of others.

The RAI does contain rather sophisticated questions for respondents to consider. It may be unreasonable to expect respondents to parse out the motivations behind their reasoning in certain activity areas over others. For example, if a respondent is asked why they chose to have children, they might answer that this was an entirely personal decision. They may not be able to recognize the influence of societal pressure and community norms that have led them to believe having children is the right thing to do. Therefore the RAI is most useful in contexts where it is important that respondents are allowed to express a combination of motivations behind their reasoning, and where we might reasonably expect that they are able to do so.

### ***Dignity, Shame, and Humiliation***

Next, we turn to indicators of dignity, shame, and a related concept, humiliation. These topics have not received as much attention as agency and empowerment in the context of development. Much of the previous work on the concepts of dignity and shame have been in the context of health care, specifically patients' rights and palliative care, or in psychology. As Reyles (2007) notes, "Shame and humiliation are central to the understanding of poverty, yet internationally comparable data on this dimension are missing." Nevertheless, dignity and its converse are dimensions related to the alleviation of absolute poverty. As Sen (1983) argues, "the ability to go without shame" is a basic capability that is a feature of "the absolutist core" of poverty.

As noted in the introduction, there exist differences between humiliation and shame. While both are negative emotions that refer to the self, shame can be described as a failing of one's own personal standards. This may or may not involve an external observer; one can feel shame without an audience. Humiliation, on the other hand, is a reactionary emotion that always involves another party, whether an individual or a group. There must always be a perpetrator and a victim of humiliation. A person might experience humiliation without shame, or that they have failed by their own personal standards (Reyles 2007). While the two are obviously closely linked, we prefer to focus on shame in the context of development, because it refers to feelings of the self, not just in relation to the actions or beliefs of others. This is more likely to hinder beliefs about their capacity to produce change, either at an individual or communal level.

One of the few examples of indicators of dignity in the context of development comes from Khatib and Armenian (2010). The authors examine levels of dignity among Palestinian refugees. They use an eighteen question indicator that seeks to capture the four elements of dignity they believe to be present in the literature. The first is autonomy, or the ability to make one's own decisions, independence, control, and functional capacity. The second is worthiness, or the capability of feeling valued by others. Third is self-respect, or respect for oneself as well as others right to respect themselves. The final element is self-esteem, defined as internally held qualities such as pride, hopefulness, or a fighting spirit.

The problem with measures such as these are that they tend to conflate dignity with other concepts. We cannot measure dignity simply by combining measures of autonomy and self-respect, as this is conceptually imprecise. Furthermore, we may

want to measure both dignity and these other concepts independently of each other, and we cannot measure multiple outcomes using the same indicators for each.

A different example comes from a 2006 USAID survey, which examines whether respondents would feel ashamed in a specific situation. The question reads as follows:

Do you agree/disagree with the following statements:

1. I would be ashamed if I was poor.
2. I would be ashamed if someone in my family was poor.
3. People living in poverty should be ashamed of themselves.
4. People who are not poor make people who are poor feel bad.

They then ask respondents how they think most people in their community would respond to the same questions. While this is an improvement over indicators that conflate various concepts, it is not without its flaws. Questions that ground feelings of shame in certain situations, such as poverty, are highly context-specific. They do not provide an accurate measure of how much shame an individual feels on average, or in some contexts versus others. This is similar to one problem previously noted in regards to agency questions grounded in household decision-making: it is impossible to design a survey that covers every situation in which an individual might feel ashamed.

One way to contend with this issue is to utilize a shame proneness indicator. Shame proneness refers to “the tendency to experience the emotion of shame in response to specific negative events.” (Tangney and Dearing 2002) The Personal Feelings Questionnaire 2 (PFQ2) scale is one of the best-established indicators of shame-proneness. (Ferguson and Crowley 1997) The PFQ2 may vary in length or specific questions, but one example, from Harder and Zalma (1990) reads as follows:

For each of the following listed feelings, please place a number from 0 to 4, reflecting how common that feeling is for you.

- 4= You experience the feeling continuously or almost continuously
- 3= You experience the feeling frequently but not continuously
- 2= You experience the feeling some of the time
- 1= You experience the feeling rarely
- 0= You never experience the feeling

1. Embarrassment
2. Feeling ridiculous
3. Self-consciousness
4. Feeling humiliated
5. Feeling stupid
6. Feeling childish
7. Feeling helpless, paralyzed
8. Feeling of blushing
9. Feeling laughable

## 10. Feeling disgusting to others

One advantage of the PFQ2 is that it measures shame proneness across time, as opposed to shame felt in a specific moment. Another advantage is that it can be used to provide a baseline for an individual, to which their shame in specific situations can be compared. For example, an individual might be less prone to shame in general, but highly prone to shame when asked about their educational attainment. However, a disadvantage of the PFQ2 is that it requires a certain amount of sophistication on the part of the respondent. They may not understand distinctions between embarrassment and feeling humiliated, for example.

Given the lack of suitable indicators previously used to measure dignity and shame, it may prove useful to borrow indicators from the healthcare and psychology literatures, and apply them in development contexts.

## Cross-cutting issues

While there exist conceptual and measurement concerns that are unique to each term, there are also issues common when evaluating these topics. The final section will discuss four cross-cutting issues that must be considered when examining each of these outcomes of interest.

First, there exists a trade-off between grounding questions in more accessible terms (for example, questions about daily life) versus being more conceptually precise. For example, we may want to enquire about how empowered a respondent feels, and even give a definition of what we mean by empowerment. But given the context of survey questions and other types of indicators, this would likely not elicit useful information. For example, in a focus group discussion in Kerala, Alkire (2007) asked women how they experienced empowerment differently in distinct aspects of their lives. When the focus group leaders directly used the word “empowerment,” the respondents did not know what it meant and could not answer the question. This caused them to become aware and self-conscious about their lack of education, because they did not know what the word meant. This in turn affected the mood of the focus group session, and prohibited an understanding of how the women felt empowered. On the other hand, if questions are grounded in daily activities, such as who makes household decisions, this may provide clarity for respondents and make it easier for them to answer the question. But, it also restricts the discussion to the domains of each specific question. It is not possible to design a survey that enquires about the decision-making process of every choice in a person's life. Therefore when designing questions, one must consider the trade-off between conceptual precision and the breadth of information elicited.

There also exists a trade-off between indicators that have been heavily used to provide a benchmark, versus creating new indicators that may be more specific. That is, there is value in using indicators from previous studies in order to provide a baseline for a new study, create realistic expectations, and determine if the new population of interest or data is unique in some way. On the other hand, using more general indicators will by

nature not be as precise in terms of conception, context, and other aspects that may be important to the study. Therefore when designing indicators, we must weigh the relative costs and benefits of commonly used questions and methods versus study-specific ones.

Third, these concepts of agency, empowerment, dignity, and humility do not occur in a vacuum. They are all *relative* ideas. Agency and empowerment require people to measure their capabilities in relation to others. Dignity was earlier defined as the ability to feel valued and important to others, communicate this to others, and be treated as such. Shame, while defined in terms of an internal evaluation, is often influenced by an individual's evaluation of themselves in relation to others, whether this evaluation reflects reality or not. Therefore when designing indicators, it is important to think about who we are asking people to compare themselves to. Is it important that we prime respondents to think about their dignity in relation to their family, their friends, their community, their former selves? This is an important aspect of designing these indicators, and depends on the type of information the observer seeks to extract.

Finally, the observer is presuming to know what domains and types of agency, empowerment, etc. people value, or what they *should* want more control over. Part of the definition of agency, for example, is that people are able to pursue goals that they *ought* to value. This is a key distinction, because observers might have different beliefs about what one should value than the beliefs of those they seek to study. For example, if a woman is asked who is responsible for the housework, and she answers that she is, the observer may interpret this as meaning she does not have agency to pursue some other more meaningful work. However, some women might deeply value doing housework as what it means to be a good, respectable woman, and therefore it is logical that she should want agency over this domain of her life. This implies that when designing these indicators, one must have an in-depth knowledge of the people and places they seek to study, in order to understand what the target population values.



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## Annex of Survey Questions

Narayan and Petesch (2007) employ the 'Ladder of Power' question, as follows:

"Imagine a 10-step ladder, where at the bottom, on the first step, stand people who are completely powerless and without rights, and on the highest step, the tenth, stand those who have a lot of power and rights. On which step of the ladder are you today? And on which step were you ten years ago?"

Phase 7 of the Harvard Demographic and Health (DHS) Survey asks,

"Who usually decides how the money you earn will be used: you, your husband/partner, or you and your husband/partner jointly?" Respondents may choose between the following answers: respondent, husband/partner, respondent and husband/partner jointly, someone else, or other. The question is also asked on the DHS survey in regards to money earned by the husband/partner, major household purchases, decisions about healthcare, and visits to family or relatives.

In World Values Survey, the enumerator reads the following statements, and asks the respondent if they agree, disagree, or neither:

1. If a woman earns more money than her husband, it's almost certain to cause problems.
2. Having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person.
3. When a mother works for pay, the children suffer.
4. Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.

Khatib and Armenian (2010) examine levels of dignity among Palestinian refugees. They use an eighteen question indicator that seeks to capture the four elements of dignity they believe to be present in the literature: autonomy, worthiness, self-respect, and self-esteem.

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length or specific questions. One example, from Harder and Zalma (1990) reads as follows:

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7. Feeling helpless, paralyzed
8. Feeling of blushing
9. Feeling laughable
10. Feeling disgusting to others

### **Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index**

The Relative Autonomy Indicator (RAI) is constructed by asking respondents whether the following motivations are always true, sometimes true, or never true in their decision-making over whatever activity area that is of interest:

1. My actions in [activity area] are because I will get in trouble with someone if I act differently
2. Regarding [activity area], I do what I do so others don't think poorly of me
3. Regarding [activity area] I do what I do because I personally think it is the right thing to do.

Following this, an index is created from a weighted sum of the responses. External coercion (acting to avoid getting into trouble) is weighted as -2; trying to please (acting so others do not think poorly of them) is weighted as -1; and own values (acting based on personal beliefs) is weighted as 3. Thus the index varies from -9 to 9, and values greater than 0 indicate that the individual is moved more by their values than by coercion or influence of others.

The following table details the exact survey questions, aggregation methods, and weighting methods for the WEAI:

**Table 1: The domains, indicators, survey questions, aggregation method, inadequacy cut-offs, and weights in the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index**

Dimension	Indicator name	Survey questions	FTF Variables	Aggregation method	Inadequacy cut-off	Weight
Production	Input in productive decisions	How much input did you have in making decisions about: food crop farming, cash crop farming, livestock raising, fish culture (To what extent do you feel you can make your own personal decisions regarding these aspects of household life if you want(ed) to: agriculture production, what inputs to buy, what types of crops to grow for agricultural production, when or who would take crops to market, livestock raising	G2.02 A-C, F G5.02 A-D	Achievement in two	Inadequate if individual participates BUT does not has not at least some input in decisions; or she does not make the decisions nor feels she could.	1/10
	Autonomy in production	My actions in [DOMAIN] are partly because I will get in trouble with someone if I act differently. Regarding [DOMAIN] I do what I do so others don't think poorly of me. Regarding [DOMAIN] I do what I do because I personally think it is the right thing to do Agricultural production, inputs to buy, crops to grow, take to market, livestock	G5.03-G5.05 A-D	Achievement in any	Inadequate if RAI below 1	1/10
Resources	Ownership of assets	Who would you say owns most of the [ITEM]? Agricultural land; Large livestock, Small livestock, Chicks etc; Fish pond/equip; Farm equip (non-mech); arm equip (mechanized) Nonfarm business equipment House; Large durables; Small durables; Cell phone; Non-ag land (any); Transport	G3.02 A-N	Achievement in any if not only one small asset (chickens, non-mechanized equipment and no small consumer durables)	Inadequate if household does not own any asset or if household owns the type of asset BUT she/he does not own most of it alone	1/15
	Purchase, sale, or transfer of assets	Who would you say can decide whether to sell, give away, rent/mortgage [ITEM] most of the time? Who contributes most to decisions regarding a new purchase of [ITEM]? Ag land; Lg livestock, Sm livestock; Chicks etc; Fish pond; Farm equip (non); Farm equip (mech)	G3.03-G3.05 A-G G3.06 A-G	Achievement in any if not only chickens and farming equipment non-mechanized	Inadequate if household does not own any asset or household owns the type of asset BUT she does not participate in the decisions (exchange or buy) about it	1/15
	Access to and decisions on credit	Who made the decision to borrow/what to do with money/item borrowed from [SOURCE]? Non-governmental organization (NGO); Informal lender; Formal lender (bank); Friends or relatives; ROSCA (savings/credit group)	G3.08-G3.09 A-E	Achievement in any	Inadequate if household has no credit OR used a source of credit BUT she/he did not participate in ANY decisions about it	1/15
Income	Control over use of income	How much input did you have in decisions on the use of income generated from: Food crop, Cash crop, Livestock, Non-farm activities, Wage & salary, Fish culture; To what extent do you feel you can make your own personal decisions regarding these aspects of household life if you want(ed) to: Your own wage or salary employment? Minor household expenditures?	G2.03 A-F G5.02 E-G	Achievement in any if not only minor household expenditures	Inadequate if participates in activity BUT has no input or little input on indecisions about income generated	1/5
Leadership	Group member	Are you a member of any: Agricultural / livestock/ fisheries producer/mkt group; Water; Forest users; Credit or microfinance group; Mutual help or insurance group (including burial societies); Trade and business association; Civic/charitable group; Local government; Religious group; Other women's group; Other group	G4.05 A-K	Achievement in any	Inadequate if is not part of AT LEAST ONE group	1/10
	Speaking in public	Do you feel comfortable speaking up in public: To help decide on infrastructure (like sm wells, roads) to be built? To ensure proper payment of wages for public work or other similar programs? To protest the misbehavior of authorities or elected officials? To intervene in case of a family dispute?	G4.01 - G4.03	Achievement in any	Inadequate if not comfortable speaking in public	1/10
Time	Workload	Worked more than 10.5 hours in previous 24 hours.	G6.01		Inadequate if works more than 10.5 hours a day	1/10
	Leisure	How would you rate your satisfaction with your available time for leisure activities like visiting neighbors, watching TV, listening to radio, seeing movies or doing sports?	G6.02		Inadequate if not satisfied (<5)	1/10