



EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND GIRLS: an indicator derived from household surveys

Low and middle income countries (LMICs) have the higher indices of marginalization and freedom deprivation of women. Having a specific Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on this topic reinforces the need to have a standard indicator to track the countries' achievement of these objectives that can also be used to assess how women at different empowerment status fare in terms of benefitting from essential health interventions. Thus, our main objective is to develop such indicator.

An indicator based on MICS and DHS surveys will allow further research on EW&G in LMICs taking advantage of a large amount of readily available data on a large number of countries. With this in mind, we took the challenge to develop such an index.

The first step was to identify questions available in most surveys that can reflect some dimension of EW&G. This is a difficult task that involves questions like "how to define EW&G?"; "how to measure it?". We took a pragmatic approach of listing all potential questions possibly related to the most commonly recognized dimensions of EW&G, such as autonomy, self-respect and decision making. From this initial list, we dropped questions that were aimed at small subgroups, sounded too subjective, or were not specific to the women (e.g. household characteristics).

Next we used principal component analysis to derive an index for each of four selected countries separately (Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Ethiopia). The results were remarkably similar, but this method only allows for within survey comparisons –a great limitation.

We need to be able to assess trends and make between-country comparison. In order to achieve these goals we used a similar approach to the development of the International Wealth Index by Smits and Steendijk, working with a combined dataset. The results were highly compatible with the individual country indices, with correlations above 0.9. Three dimensions of empowerment were identified: attitude to violence, autonomy and decision making.

Using this global index, we compared countries and assessed how women classified in quintiles of autonomy fared in coverage by interventions such as skilled birth attendant. Typically, more empowered women had higher intervention coverage. Also, in most cases their children presented a lower prevalence of stunting. All analyses controlled by wealth status.

We are in a very initial stage of the work, but the results are promising. The next steps involve increasing the number of study countries and assessing whether the results obtained will be consistent either at global or regional level.