Building Blocks of Empowerment of Women and Girls

These Building Blocks are a first step towards a conceptual model of empowerment of women and girls for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.[i] The conceptual model aims for:

- ✓ *Conceptual clarity* on what empowerment of women and girls means for the foundation
- ✓ A *common language* to work on and measure empowerment of women and girls
- ✓ *Ownership of and buy-in* by key foundation stakeholders for this conceptual model of empowerment of women and girls.

1) Empowerment of women and girls within a theory of change

There is general consensus within the Gates Foundation on three related motivations for working on empowerment of women and girls. One considers **empowerment of women and girls as a goal in itself**, particularly in terms of gender equality outcomes vis-à-vis decision-making power and agency, control over resources, personal safety, mobility and equitable personal relationships. A second motivation is to consider **empowerment of women and girls as a means to better development and health outcomes**. A third is to **reduce unintended negative outcomes** for women and girls and avoid worsening of existing gender inequalities that may occur when programs are designed and implemented without an intentional focus on gender.

Being clear about the motivation to promote women's empowerment supports priority setting, strategy development, resource allocation, risk assessment and measurement.

2) Defining empowerment: theoretical foundation

Below are key ways empowerment is understood in academic and practitioner thinking. They represent fundamental ideas about what empowerment is and about what it will take to achieve it. As such, they are critical to shaping approaches to work on and measure empowerment of women and girls.

Empowerment as the expansion of women's abilities to make and influence **choices** that affect their lives	• Expanding choice comes from realized tangible and intangible *resources* and women's *agency* (the ability to define one's goals and act upon them). These translate into *outcomes.*
Empowerment as a **process of transformative changes** that are dynamic, iterative, and non-linear	• Change occurs at multiple levels and across different dimensions. It is about **the link between *individual* change and *systemic* change** – in norms, attitudes, power relations - of social institutions (state, market, households).
Empowerment is about redistributing **power** between individuals or groups	• Empowerment engages with 'power over' (ability to control others) as well as 'power to' (to do something), 'power within' (self-esteem, dignity, self-respect) and 'power with' (from solidarity, collective action, mutual support).
Empowerment as **context-specific and driven by women themselves**	• This means that women themselves, rather than other people or experts, have a voice in and direct the change they desire and how to get there. • It is about expanding women's choice to live their desired life; not defining what choices they should be making.

3) Dimensions of empowerment: what changes for women and girls

Empowerment entails change, but what is to change? Below are seven key areas of change, emerging from the foundation's work and literature on empowerment. The dimensions point to concrete areas of change that need to be articulated in the conceptual model. This will allow us to better understand what we expect to change and, therefore, how to facilitate and measure it.

Dimension	What changes for women and girls	An example
Decision-making	Her ability to act upon goals she establishes without having her possibilities limited by societal rules and customs (power to, agency)	An adolescent girl exercising choice over her sexual and reproductive health
Control over resources and assets	Her ability to access and exercise choice over resources, both tangible (e.g. income, land, credit) and intangible (e.g. time, networks, education, information)	A woman having access to her household's income and deciding, either autonomously or jointly, how to spend those resources and to what benefit
Self-esteem/Self-efficacy	Her sense of self-worth and the capacity to imagine a different reality and the possibility of a better future (power within)	A woman gaining the confidence to pursue a new business opportunity
Norms	Shared beliefs, values and social expectations of women and girls - within her community and beyond - that influence her decisions, choices and behavior	An adolescent girl hearing a community leader speak up against early marriage and understanding that she has the support of her family and community to choose if, when, and who she marries
Mobility	Her freedom to move in different spaces of her life (home, work, school, community) without the threat of violence, reprisal or judgement	A woman farmer taking her crops to sell at the market without without facing harrasment or social stigma
Gender-based violence	Living free of violence or threat of violence, experienced because of (and to maintain) her subordinate social position relative to men	An adolescent girl attending school without the risk of coerced sex from her peers or teachers
Collective action	Their solidarity, mutual support and shared sense of identity and confidence from working together (power with)	A women's Self-Help Group holding their local government accountable to deliver quality healthcare services
Leadership	Her capacity to lead, inspire social change and effectively participate in governance	Women being represented and having a voice in local and national government and decisions

4) Cross-cutting considerations

A conceptual model on empowerment of women and girls also requires a consideration of cross-cutting themes. Critical considerations that emerged from the literature and the foundation's work include intersectionality, a life cycle perspective and the engagement of men and boys in promoting gender equality.

Intersectionality

Women and girls experience inequity differently due to how gender **intersects** with other aspects of their lives—age, race, class, caste, religion, ability, sexual orientation, etc. This means that different women and girls face diverse constraints, but also have unique opportunities to pursue in their lives. For example, an educated woman from a majority ethnic group may experience different benefits from collective action and women's organizing than an illiterate woman from an ethnic minority. Or, a high income woman farmer might be better placed to access and use agricultural inputs, or sell or her agricultural products, than an educated woman in a landless family.

A life cycle approach

A **life cycle approach** recognizes that age influences women's and girls' ability to make choices in their lives. Women's (dis)empowerment hence varies at different stages in their lives. These include *life stages and events*, such as menses, sexual debut, marriage, and childbearing. For example, an unmarried adolescent girl may have the freedom to choose to stay in school and further her education, but may later have that choice restricted if she gets married or becomes pregnant. A life cycle perspective also calls for considering *inter-generational* effects, for example how the nutrition, education or health of children are related to a woman's control over resources and decision-making.

Engagement with men and boys

Empowerment of women and girls also needs to take into account **engagement with men and boys** in the realization of gender equality. Men and boy's beliefs and behaviors are also informed by gender norms, social identities and power relations with women and with other men. Men and boys have the potential to support or hinder empowerment for women and girls through their different roles such as fathers, brothers, school mates, partners, government officials, etc.

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[i] The building blocks presented here have been developed in partnership between the Gates Foundation and the KIT Gender team, as part of a larger process to articulate a conceptual model of empowerment of women and girls and to improve its measurement. The building blocks draw from an initial and selected reading of the literature, along with extensive conversations with over 35 foundation officers and stakeholders and building on the work of the foundation and its partners. They have also benefitted from feedback and discussions during five webinar sessions, which included over 30 foundation staff.