

Women's Economic Empowerment: The Unintended Consequences

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is often touted as the magic bullet—one that can redress gender inequality, reduce poverty, promote wellbeing and mitigate violence. The proposed panacea is enticing: increase women's earnings and bargaining power, raise incomes, reduce poverty and promote gender equality within and beyond the household. However, others contend that while the focus on WEE is critical, social and gender norms that underlie gender inequality are so pervasive that a narrow or disproportionate focus on economic over empowerment outcomes may not work and can sometimes lead to unintended consequences.

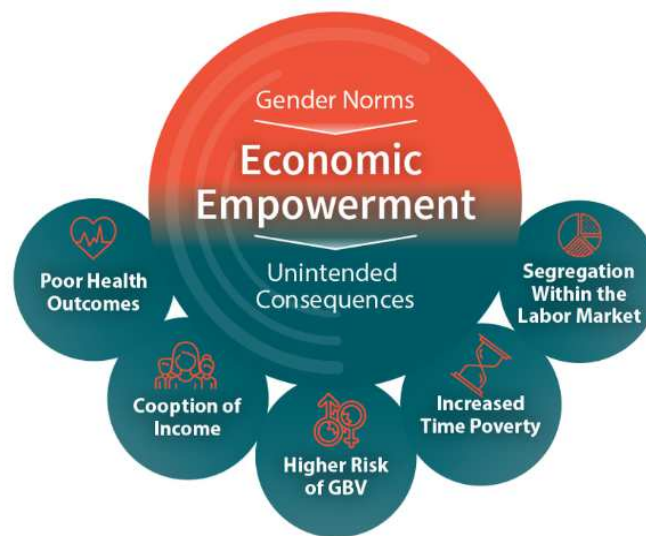


Figure 1: Preliminary conceptual framework on the unintended consequences of WEE programming

This brief interrogates a number of these unintended consequences with the goal of highlighting how they could be addressed and mitigated through programming. These unintended consequences include increased time poverty, sex-segregated labor markets, gender-based violence, the cooption or loss of income and poor health outcomes.

Increased time poverty

Around the world women work longer hours than men. While men typically do more hours of paid work, women have a much higher burden of unpaid work; they spend twice as much time on household work and four times as much time on childcare and caring for the sick, disabled and the elderly.¹ **Women's increased participation in paid work does not automatically mean that household responsibilities are redistributed among family members. Even in households where both men and women work for pay, women continue to perform more hours of unpaid labor.**² The increased time poverty disproportionately impacts poorer women who cannot afford to outsource care responsibilities and migrant women who do not have a supportive network of family members nearby.^{3,4} Molyneux found, for example, that anti-poverty cash-transfer programs in Mexico positioned the mothers' role in meeting children's health and education targets as a key to success. They were also required to undertake community work which increased their time burdens. The resulting pressure on the mothers perpetuated and sometimes exacerbated, the time women spent on unpaid care, with many participants feeling "discriminated against" by the demands it placed on their time in order to comply with the demands of the cash transfer program.⁵

Programs that do not take women's care work and other traditional responsibilities into account can result in women having a double workday and increased time poverty.⁶ This can trigger adverse consequences for both women and those in their care and ultimately limits the ability of women to participate in the economy and have control over the sector, location and working hours of their jobs.⁷

Segregation within the job market

Globally, women's participation in the labor force has increased over the last few decades, but often they are concentrated in informal and part-time jobs that provide the flexibility women need to balance their different responsibilities within and outside the home. In virtually all countries, women are more likely to be employed in part-time work than men.⁸ When employed within the same industry as men, women are often concentrated in support functions with slow career growth potential.⁹ And women who choose to run their own businesses are more likely to own informal micro or small businesses. **Working in less regulated markets, support functions and part-time jobs mean that women are typically paid less, are less likely to receive social protection coverage, such as social insurance or pensions, parental benefits and sometimes are forced to work in precarious conditions.**¹⁰ Informal work can also mean that women are less able to organize and participate in unions and collectives. Women who are not members of unions or collectives are likely to earn significantly less than those who are and are less likely to receive benefits.^{11, 12, 13}

Box 1: Cash Cropping in Oromia, Ethiopia

In Oromia, cash crop development has switched from less profitable and more time-demanding crops to different cropping that is less time intensive. As a result, women's agricultural labor has become less onerous and family incomes have increased. At the same time, gender norms have been shifting towards greater sharing of care responsibilities, especially in younger and more educated households whose members have been exposed to gender trainings led by Oxfam and other development different organizations.

While these changes were not the intention of the programs, Oxfam project managers noted that "...if care had been integrated into the projects' theories of change right from the start, then they might have achieved even more than they did."

Ensuring that projects address care work is only a first step to reducing women's time constraints. If we can begin with better understandings of whether, how and why, norms and behavior are already changing, then we should be able to craft much smarter interventions, incorporating other evidence for what works in different contexts—such as the training and awareness-raising and community and household dialogue.

Identifying and taking advantage of shifts in social norms can be a powerful strategy for the design of programs that seek transformative change and greater gender equality.

Source: Adapted from Oxfam, <https://views-voices.oxfam.org.uk/2017/12/critical-junctures-care-work/>

Even when employed full-time, women are more likely to be concentrated in low-ranking, low-paying jobs. This is true even for female-dominated sectors and occupations in education, care and health care.¹⁴ In many countries, women are more likely to be employed in professions that pay less than male-dominated professions. Evidence from cross-country comparisons shows that pay for the same occupation is relatively higher in one country where the job is dominated by men than in another country where it is dominated by women.^{15,16} If not undertaken with attention to sex-segregation in labor markets, WEE programs can unintentionally reinforce existing stereotypes about women's capabilities and perpetuate the segregation of women into low-paying jobs.

Gender based violence

WEE has the potential to decrease violence against women by increasing women's bargaining power, reducing the stress men may experience as primary breadwinners and fostering shifts towards gender equality at the household and community level. It can also lead to increased violence, especially in contexts where women do not have the freedom to leave their marriages and take their property and assets with them. **Men may view women's economic gains as undermining their power and status and seek to retake power through violence or use violence and harassment to express their dissatisfaction with shifting gender roles and the visibility of women in the marketplace.** For example, several studies in Bangladesh have noted that micro-finance programs can trigger intimate partner violence against women as men often resent the transfer and control of resources to women and fear potential shifts in household division of labour as women take on more responsibilities outside the home.^{17, 18, 19} A recent study from 20 sub-Saharan African countries found that employed women were 19% more likely to experience violence compared to non-working women.^{20, 21} Similarly, there is some evidence suggesting that working women tend to experience greater violence from both intimate and non-intimate partners, compared to non-working women, because they are more likely to encounter men in public areas and in the workplace.^{22, 23}

Contextual and community level factors and prevailing gender norms and gender relations have an impact on the level of violence women experience. For example, in communities with more patriarchal attitudes or where acceptance of violence is high, the risk of WEE programs increasing violence is higher in the beginning and may decline over time.²⁴ A study in Tanzania found that the impact of WEE could vary based on place of residence.²⁵ Although the risk of violence was higher among working women, compared to non-working women, earning pay itself had different impacts on the likelihood of experiencing violence. For example, being paid in cash had a greater protective effect for rural women than for urban women, while the stability of income afforded greater protection against violence in urban areas. Another study suggests that WEE is more likely to increase violence if women have limited decision-making ability prior to the WEE intervention or if women later earn more income than their spouse or achieve education levels equal to or higher than their partners.²⁶ Understanding these subtle differences in earnings and the way the context affects the experience of violence, can help shape WEE programming to reduce these risks.

Box 2. In Nepal, women in employment are more vulnerable to violence

ICRW's research in Nepal examined the linkages between women's paid employment, asset ownership and household decision-making ability with their experience of partner violence and non-partner violence using survey data from 937 women members of cooperative societies in seven districts. We hypothesized that in a traditional setting such as Nepal, where prevailing social and gender norms favor men, women who show evidence of 'empowerment' are more likely to experience violence from both their partners and non-family members. The study measured the experience of intimate partner violence as well as violence perpetrated by someone other than an intimate partner, including violence experienced at the workplace and/or on the way to work.

The research concluded that employed women, regardless of their asset ownership or decision-making ability, experienced more violence from partners as well as other men. Employed women were also more likely to report increased lifetime experience of violence from men other than their intimate partner as compared to non-working women.

Investments in longitudinal studies are needed to understand the point at which economic empowerment yields reversals in violence experienced.

Source: John, N. A. (2018). Linkages between Women's Participation in Work and their Experience of Violence in Nepal ICRW Working Paper.

Co-option of Income and Credit

Another shortcoming of WEE programs is that on their own, they may not be able to shift intra-household power dynamics. As a result, women may be unable to retain control over financial resources and income gained from their participation in these programs. While there is some evidence to support the success of self-help and micro-credit programs in increasing women's earning capabilities, there is also evidence that husbands can take control of these loans, thus increasing the woman's dependence on her husband for loan repayments. A study from Bangladesh, for example, found that 43% of women participating in a micro-credit program had no control over their loans.²⁷ Similarly, a study from Ghana found that while some women were able to benefit from their loans, others had little control over the use of their loans, with some even being harassed and becoming poorer because they were unable to repay loans on time.²⁸ Without parallel investments in norms change and intrahousehold communication, narrowly focused WEE interventions are particularly limited in their ability to shift intra-household dynamics. This may be particularly true in very poor and vulnerable households where the demand for credit is high and women typically have very limited control and ownership of productive assets. For example, a study among very poor women participating in self-help groups in a drought-prone region of India where credit needs were high, found that the loans given to women were often diverted into production or consumption needs of the household.²⁹ Although these strategies helped the families cope with drought, there were adverse consequences for the women participants. Their lack of ownership of family's productive assets meant that they were unable to manage their repayments and their control over family resources further diminished. These findings highlight the need to transfer assets within the family to women if WEE programs want to achieve gender equality.

Box 3: BRAC's poverty alleviation program in Bangladesh reduces poverty but reduces women's control over income and increases time burden.

BRAC's "Targeting the Ultra Poor Program" (TUP) was a graduation model program in Bangladesh to alleviate poverty among the poorest rural women who are unable to benefit from microcredit programs. The TUP program consisted of "support in the form of cash and assets transfer, saving and credit access, and skills training for 24 months with the aim of creating self-reliance among women in extreme poverty." Das et al's evaluation of the program in 2011 found that while the program increased food security, improved health and hygiene and doubled asset value at the household level, it increased women's workload by adding to their already existing unpaid housework and care work, and the nature of the productive activity inside the home reduced their mobility from baseline.

The researchers also found that men in the household continued to hold ownership of productive assets and land before and after the program. In fact, by the end of the program, although women technically owned the transferred asset, they had more limited ability to take decisions over their own income, purchases and budgeting. So even though the program reduced poverty, it failed to foster women's economic empowerment. Lessons from the TUP shows that it is important to address social norms around women's unpaid workload, their voice and decision-making power in the household, mobility outside the household and increase access to childcare and assets and land.

Source: Adapted from: Das, N et al. 2013. How Do Intrahousehold Dynamics Change When Assets Are Transferred to Women? Evidence from BRAC's Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction—Targeting the Ultra Poor Program in Bangladesh. IFPRI Discussion Paper 01317.

Poor health outcomes

Participating in poor quality jobs and enduring abusive work environments can have significant negative effects on women's health. For example, workers with constant job insecurity face more psychiatric morbidity than those with more secure jobs.³⁰ But the health consequences of "bad jobs" can range far beyond stress. Reports from India show that in sectors reluctant to hire menstruating women, women are forced to remove their uterus to be employed.³¹

Many of the unintended consequences of WEE programs previously mentioned have implications for women's health. Research on the burden of caregivers found that women assume more caregiving roles than men ("mother, wage earner, household manager and primary emotional supporter") and thus face higher chronic fatigue, sleeplessness, weight change, depression, anxiety and an "overwhelming significant increase in the illness rate."^{32,33} Violence, both in the workplace and at home, can lead to myriad physical and mental health problems that can persist over a lifetime. Global research shows that victimization is strongly associated with negative physical health outcomes, such as injury, permanent disability and various chronic conditions, as well as emotional and behavioral damage leading to depression and substance abuse.^{34,35} Women who face violence also experience reproductive health impacts such as increased risk of infections, STDs, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions and miscarriages.³⁶

Box 4. Women's added work burden negatively impact their and their children's health in India.

Rao and Raju (2017) conducted research in 11 villages of two districts of India to look at both the positive and negative impacts of women's increased participation in agriculture on household nutrition. While women's increased control over income can increase quality of diet, women's increased time burden of household and outside work can result in trade-offs between agricultural work and care responsibilities, affecting the health of household members. The authors found that women's agricultural work negatively impacted nutrition of household members in two ways: "lack of adequate time for care work in peak agricultural seasons and low seasonal energy with consequent losses in body weight."

The research indicated that, due to feminization of agriculture in India, men and women in the study spent about the same amount of time on agriculture, sometimes as high as 9-10 hours a day. But without a simultaneous redistribution of domestic work, women continue to be the primary childcare providers—performing 90 percent of all unpaid care work. The additional outside work reduced their childcare time significantly, especially during planting season by about 30 percent. This affected the health and hygiene of the children and long workdays deprived women of sleep and drained their energy for household work.

Source: Rao, Nitya. and S, Raju (2017) Gendered Time, Seasonality and Nutrition: Insights from Two Indian Districts, LANSAs Working Paper series 2017 No 22. Brighton: LANSAs

Conclusion

The various examples shared in this brief illustrate that WEE initiatives that simply look at women's income generation activities in isolation, and do not explore "empowerment" in greater depth, risk numerous unintended negative consequences for women. This is because the outcomes are typically mediated by gender and social norms that entrench the status quo and protect the power and privilege of those who benefit from it. Effective economic empowerment programs and policies need to consider underlying social and gender norms that might impact the wellbeing of women. Without exploring likely unintended consequences and engaging in accompanying behavioral change communication to ensure positive outcomes, the projects and programs may not have the positive outcomes sought. **Women's Economic Empowerment programs must include multiple and intersecting interventions that also address structural barriers that limit women's ability to enjoy their freedoms and benefit from their participation in productive work.**

Our ongoing research on unintended consequences has identified several opportunities to integrate intentional WEE programming that anticipates and addresses these unintended consequences into development initiatives.³⁷ Table 1 summarizes some of the findings at the policy and program design level.

Table 1. Examples of considerations for designing WEE policies and programs

Unintended Consequence	Policy	Program design
Increased time poverty	<p>Public investment in initiatives that reduce women's time burden:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child and elder care, non-transferable paid parental leave and infrastructure and energy projects that reduce the drudgery and time required to do household work; • Reproductive health policies that increase access to a variety of modern contraceptive methods; <p>Integrate time-use surveys in national surveys periodically.</p> <p>Maintain satellite accounts on time use.</p>	<p>Invest in gender transformative programming that addresses gender norms with adolescents and adults;</p> <p>Invest in couple-based programs that shift intra-household power dynamics and care responsibilities;</p> <p>Monitor change in men's and women's time-use as a result of interventions and programs.</p>
Segregation within the labor market	<p>Expand opportunities for women to participate in non-traditional roles and occupations;</p> <p>Enact non-discrimination legislation;</p> <p>Encourage women's participation in trade unions and collectives.</p> <p>Invest in better working conditions and pay in women-dominated industries;</p> <p>Invest in social services that can be accessed by men and women across various employment statuses;</p> <p>Explore the use of policy levers such as procurement policy to break down occupational segregation by sex.</p>	<p>Conduct research and support advocacy for better working conditions and pay in women-dominated industries.</p> <p>Support women's participation in trade unions and collectives;</p>
Higher risk of GBV	<p>Enact and enforce laws and policies that protect against any form of gender-based violence and sexual harassment;</p>	<p>Invest in gender transformative programming that addresses gender</p>

Unintended Consequence	Policy	Program design
	<p>Provide safe public transportation systems that are women-friendly;</p> <p>Collect and monitor data on the experience of violence using national surveys and instruments.</p>	<p>norms change with adolescents and adults;</p> <p>Invest in couple-based programs that shift intra-household dynamics and teach couples communication, negotiation and conflict management skills.</p> <p>To engage in internationally transformative programs, Oxfam addresses violence by integrating a <i>Do-no Harm</i> mechanism in their WEE programming.³⁸</p>
Cooption of income	<p>Enact and enforce laws and policies that give women rights to own property and other productive assets.</p>	<p>Ensure women have ownership of assets and productive goods;</p> <p>Ensure data privacy to protect women's earnings and savings;</p> <p>Invest in gender transformative programming with adolescents and adults.</p>
Poor health outcomes	<p>Invest in universal access to social protection and health care;</p> <p>Enact legislation and enforce oversight of working conditions.</p>	<p>Monitor projects and programs and collect data on physical and emotional wellbeing;</p> <p>Conduct focus groups with program participants to explore unintended health consequences and propose solutions.</p>

Endnotes

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