Women’s Economic Empowerment: Are we doing it right?

Women’s economic empowerment (WEE) is often touted as the magic bullet— one that can respond to 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 the economic outcomes as opposed the empowerment outcomes may not work and can sometimes lead to unintended consequences.

This brief interrogates a number of these unintended consequences with the goal of highlighting how programming can address and mitigate these consequences. Among these unintended consequences are 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 perform more hours of work than men. While men typically do more hours of paid work, women have a much higher burden of unpaid work, spending 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 the 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 don't have a network of family members nearby to share the care work.³ ⁴ Molyneux found, for example, that anti-poverty cash-transfer programs in Mexico positioned mothers’ role in meeting children’s health and education targets as a key to success. The resulting pressure on the mothers perpetuated, and sometimes exacerbated, women's time spent on unpaid care, and many participants in the program reported feeling “discriminated against” by the demands it placed on their time.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 experiencing greater time poverty. This can lead to adverse consequences for both women and those they care for, 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.

**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. When employed within the same industry as men, women are often concentrated in support functions with slow career growth potential. And among women who choose to run their own businesses, they are more likely to own micro or small businesses in informal sectors. **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.** 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 less likely to receive benefits.

**Box 1: Cash Cropping in Oromia, Ethiopia**

In Oromia, cash crop development has seen a switch from less profitable and more time-demanding crops to different cropping requiring the less intensive use of time. 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 different development different organizations -- including Oxfam.

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 norm change 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/](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. In many countries worldwide, women are more likely to be employed in professions that pay less than male-dominated professions. Evidence shows that in cross-country comparisons, when a certain occupation is dominated by men the pay is relative higher than another a country where the same occupation is dominated by women. 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 levels of violence women experience by increasing women’s bargaining power, decreasing 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 increases in 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 retrieve power through violence or use violence and harassment to express their dissatisfaction with shifting gender roles and the visibility of women in the market place. For example, several studies in Bangladesh have noted that micro-finance programs can trigger intimate partner violence against women in households as men often resent the transfer and control of resources to women and fear the potential shifts in household division of labour that this may trigger as women take on more responsibilities outside the home. 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. Similarly, there is some evidence suggesting that working women tend to experience higher levels of 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.

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 this risk may decline over-time. A study in Tanzania found that the impact of WEE might vary based on place of residence. Although the risk of violence was higher among working women compared to non-working women, earning 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 it was the stability of income that afforded greater protection against violence in urban areas. Another study suggests that WEE is more likely to increase rather than decrease violence if women have limited decision-making ability prior to the WEE intervention or if women end up having greater income than their spouse and if women have education levels equal to or higher than their partners. Understanding these subtle differences in earnings and the way the context affects the experience of violence, has the potential to shape WEE programming to reduce these risks.
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, woman may be unable to retain control over financial resources and income gained from their participation in these programs. While there is some evidence supporting 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, which only increases the woman's dependence on her husband for loan repayments. A study from Bangladesh, for example, found that 43% of women who were 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 experiencing harassment and becoming poorer because they were unable to repay loans on time.28

Without parallel investments in norm 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 very high and women typically have very limited control and ownership of over productive assets. For example, a study among very poor women participating in self-help groups from 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. Women's 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 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 7 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.

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. 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.

Many of the unintended consequences of WEE programs that have already been mentioned have implications for women's health. Research on the burden of caregivers found that women take on more roles of caregiving than men as “mother, wage earner, household manager, and primary emotional supporter” and as a result face higher chronic fatigue, sleeplessness, weight change, depression, anxiety and an “overwhelming significant increase in the illness rate.” Violence, both in the workplace and at home, can lead to a myriad of physical and mental health problems that can persist over a lifetime. Research from around the globe 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.

Women who face violence also experience reproductive health impacts such as increased risk of infections, STDs, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions and miscarriages.

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 the status quo. 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 a number of opportunities to integrate intentional WEE programming that anticipates and addresses these unintended consequences into development initiatives. 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

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<tr>
<th>Unintended Consequence</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Program design</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Increased time poverty</strong></td>
<td>Public investment in initiatives that reduce women's time burden:</td>
<td>Invest in gender transformative programming that addresses gender norms with adolescents and adults;</td>
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<td>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;</td>
<td>Invest in couple-based programs that shift intra-household power dynamics and care responsibilities;</td>
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<td>Reproductive health policies that increase access to a variety of modern contraceptive methods;</td>
<td>Monitor change in men's and women's time-use as a result of interventions and programs.</td>
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<td>Integrate time-use surveys in national surveys periodically.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Maintain satellite accounts on time use.</td>
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<td><strong>Segregation within the labor market</strong></td>
<td>Expand opportunities for women to participate in non-traditional roles and occupations;</td>
<td>Conduct research and support advocacy for better working conditions and pay in women-dominated industries.</td>
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<td>Enact non-discrimination legislation;</td>
<td>Support women's participation in trade unions and collectives;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage women's participation in trade unions and collectives.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Invest in better working conditions and pay in women-dominated industries;</td>
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<td>Invest in social services that can be accessed by men and women across various employment statuses;</td>
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<td>Explore the use of policy levers such as procurement policy to break down occupational segregation by sex.</td>
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<td>Unintended Consequence</td>
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<td><strong>Higher risk of GBV</strong></td>
<td>Enact and enforce laws and policies that protect against any form of gender-based violence and sexual harassment; Provide safe public transportation systems that are women friendly; Collect and monitor data on the experience of violence using national surveys and instruments.</td>
<td>Invest in gender transformative programming that addresses gender norm change with adolescents and adults; Invest in couple-based programs that shift intra-household dynamics and teach couples communication, negotiation and conflict management skills. To engage in internationally transformative programs, Oxfam addresses violence by integrating a Do-no Harm mechanism in their WEE programming.</td>
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<td><strong>Cooption of income</strong></td>
<td>Enact and enforce laws and policies that give women rights to own property and other productive assets;</td>
<td>Ensure women have ownership of assets and productive goods; Ensure data privacy to protect women’s earnings and savings; Invest in gender transformative programming with adolescents and adults</td>
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<td><strong>Poor health outcomes</strong></td>
<td>Invest in universal access to social protection and health care; Enact legislation and enforce oversight of working conditions;</td>
<td>Monitor projects and programs and collect data on physical and emotional wellbeing; Conduct focus groups with program participants to explore unintended health consequences and propose solutions.</td>
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46 This research includes a systematic review of unintended consequences in the development literature and a portfolio review of ongoing research at ICRW that addresses social norm change.