

2016–2026

GENDER DATA THAT DRIVES CHANGE:

Celebrating Ten Years of Global Partnership through EMERGE



TULANE UNIVERSITY
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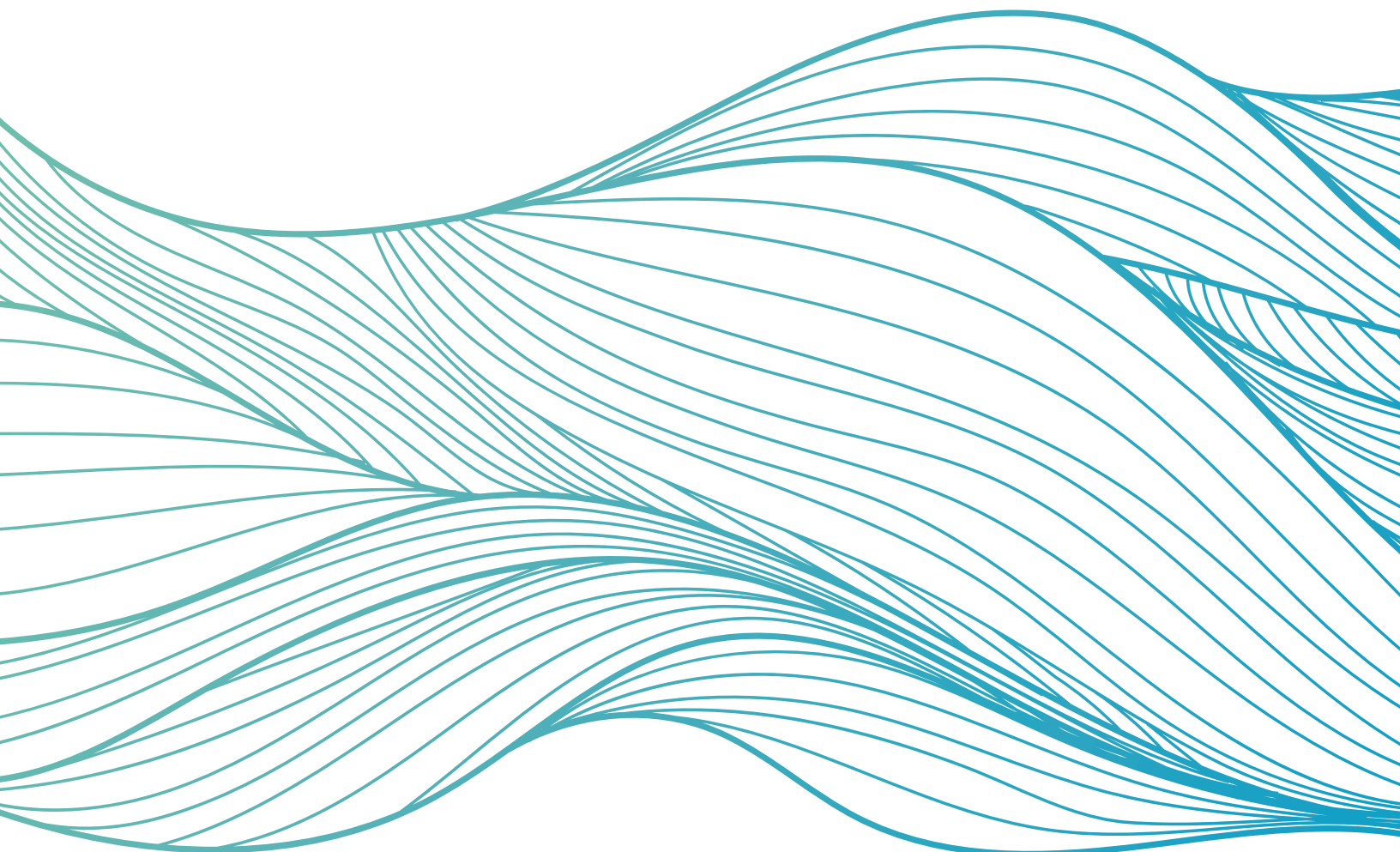
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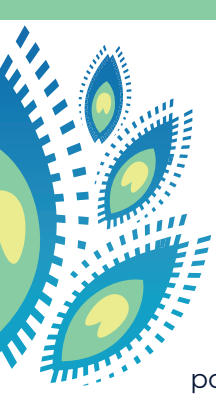
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BACKGROUND AND HISTORY OF EMERGE

EMERGE originated from a recognition that the global gender and development field lacked a unified, theoretically grounded approach to empowerment measurement. Although empowerment has been a central theme in feminist scholarship and international development policy, its operationalization remained inconsistent across disciplines and geographic regions.

EMERGE was among the first projects funded to address these limitations by building a systematic, evidence-based framework for empowerment measurement.

The early work of EMERGE involved extensive conceptual development and literature synthesis across the fields of psychology, gender studies, public health, economics, and political science. This multi disciplinary review informed the creation of the EMERGE empowerment framework, which emphasizes critical consciousness, agency, and pursuit of goals within individual, relational, and structural contexts (Raj & McDougal, 2019). This framework allowed EMERGE to identify gaps in existing measures and guide the development of a curated, evaluated repository.

Importantly, EMERGE's origins were global from the outset. Early work began in India, where collaboration with Indian researchers led to measurement-development grants for regional academic teams. These partnerships highlighted the importance of grounding empowerment measurement in local contexts and the necessity of strengthening global research capacity. They also revealed widespread gaps in training on measurement science, psychometrics, and gender theory, which became foundational components of EMERGE's mission.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EMERGE PLATFORM

The EMERGE platform (emerge.ucsd.edu) was designed as a global public good—an open-access repository of empowerment measures accessible across resource settings. It aimed to democratize measurement by making high-quality tools discoverable, comparable, and usable regardless of geographic or institutional constraints. The platform elevated the scientific foundations of empowerment measurement by providing standardized psychometric and feasibility scoring, conceptual guidance, and clear documentation of constructs and validation evidence. The intention was not only for users to identify measures that had previously been developed and psychometrically tested, but also to enable the adaptation and testing of these measures in different populations and contexts. These adapted measures could then be psychometrically assessed and added to the EMERGE repository.

As the platform expanded, EMERGE recognized that access to tools was insufficient without training in how to select, apply, and interpret measures. Thus, the initiative developed instructional modules, webinars, and [training materials](#) that covered [empowerment theory](#), gender equality frameworks, study design, and psychometric analysis and measurement development. EMERGE subsequently partnered with academic institutions, UN agencies, international NGOs such as the World Bank, and civil society organizations to offer no-cost training globally, strengthening measurement capacity in regions that

blogs that disseminated findings from specific empowerment domains. This sustained investment in researcher development supported the diffusion of EMERGE's scientific standards across disciplines and continents.

Since our global launch in 2019 till year-end of 2025, the EMERGE platform had a total of 670,000 new users from across the globe. The majority of users are from the United Kingdom, the United States, India, and other South Asian countries. On a typical day, EMERGE is used by approximately 300–500 users from 50–70 countries worldwide. Users have primarily found EMERGE through organic Google searches (76%), with a meaningful direct segment from Bing and even ChatGPT referrals. The site is a successful public good, available for free to anyone with internet access. A review of our registered users indicates that most users are students and researchers, both academics and implementers.

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The purpose of this report is to examine ***the evolution of gender empowerment measurement over the past decade using the EMERGE platform as a central reference point.*** By systematically assessing what domains of empowerment are being measured, which populations are included, where measures are developed and applied, and how measurement quality has changed over time, the report provides a comprehensive picture of the current empowerment measurement landscape. In doing so, it highlights both areas of substantive progress and persistent gaps that limit the field's ability to generate inclusive, policy-relevant evidence.

This assessment is particularly timely for the field. As global gender equality efforts transition toward the post-2030 development agenda, there is growing recognition that accountability and impact depend on the availability of robust, theory-grounded, and comparable measures of empowerment across contexts. At the same time, uncertainty around the sustainability of major global data platforms—such as large-scale household and violence surveys—poses risks to the continuity of population-level measurement of key gender equality and empowerment themes. By clarifying what measurement tools currently exist, where they are strong, and where critical gaps remain, this report offers practical guidance for researchers, funders, multilateral agencies, and policymakers seeking to strengthen the evidence base for gender equality and ensure that empowerment measurement remains a central pillar of research and action in the decade ahead.

IDENTIFYING EMPOWERMENT MEASURES

Empowerment measure publications were found through academic database searches and reviews, hand-searching of references of key publications, networking at conferences and meetings, personal communication with partners and through submissions from those developing and publishing measures. EMERGE has worked continuously over the past decade, from 2016 to 2025, to review measures of gender empowerment identified in the peer-reviewed published literature or via grey literature and reports. Peer-reviewed measurement studies were only included if psychometric data were available to confirm the validity and/or reliability of the survey measure or index. Grey literature or reports without psychometric data were only accepted for multi-country studies or multi-regional studies, with population data weighted to yield population representative estimates for states/districts or nations, to allow for cross-national or cross-regional validity checks. In cases where surveys were conducted over years, we used the most recent available version of the survey in EMERGE and updated as needed if a newer version was available. All identified measures included citations allowing for analysis by date of development and author affiliations (and country of their institution), to track shifts in focal areas over time and representation of low and middle-income countries (LMIC) authors in LMIC-based studies. A major caveat of the reviewed literature is that the work had to be available in English, a key limitation of this work.

Each measure included was categorized by domain, population, psychometrics and ease of use:

I. Categorizing Domains and Constructs Measured

The EMERGE platform organizes gender equality and empowerment measures using a structured framework that distinguishes between domains, constructs, and measures. Within EMERGE, a domain refers to a broad thematic area of empowerment that is substantively meaningful for research and policy, which include economic empowerment, health, education, gender-based violence, social empowerment, household relations, legal and political empowerment, time poverty, and psychological empowerment. These domains were identified through multiple individual and group consultations with key researchers in the field in the early part of the project and synthesized for overlaps and saturation. Domains function as organizing categories that group related concepts across individual, household, community, and structural levels, allowing users to identify measures aligned with major dimensions of gender equality while maintaining flexibility across disciplinary and sectoral perspectives.

Within each domain, EMERGE defines specific constructs—theoretical concepts that represent distinct, measurable components of empowerment (e.g., agency, decision-making

power, social norms, freedom of movement, financial inclusion, intimate partner violence, mental health). Constructs serve as the analytic bridge between empowerment theory and measurement, clarifying what aspect of empowerment a measure is intended to capture. Measures on the platform—either single items or multi-item scales or indexes—are explicitly linked to one or more constructs and tracked using standardized metadata, including population, geographic context, psychometric properties, and citation history. This structure allows EMERGE to systematically catalog and compare measures across domains and contexts, while supporting transparent assessment of measurement quality, conceptual coverage, and gaps in the empowerment evidence base.

II. Assessing Populations of Study in the Measurement Literature

The EMERGE platform systematically documented characteristics of populations in which measures were tested along two dimensions: age and gender. Age categories distinguish early adolescents (10–14), adolescents (15–19), and adults (18+), while gender categories distinguish cisgender women, cisgender men, and gender-diverse populations when reported. Many measures do not clearly describe intersectional characteristics such as rural residence, tribal or Indigenous identity, disability, socioeconomic status, migration, or humanitarian context. As such, analyses of population representation reflect only the characteristics consistently available in published sources. This limitation underscores a broader gap in empowerment measurement: insufficiently detailed reporting on population demographics.

III. Evaluating Psychometrics of Empowerment Measures

EMERGE [assesses psychometric quality](#) based on documented reliability and validity evidence. Reliability scoring considers internal consistency (e.g., Cronbach's alpha), test-retest reliability, and inter-rater reliability, when applicable. Validity scoring includes assessment of construct validity, convergent and discriminant validity, criterion validity, and content validity based on formative research or expert review. Measures are categorized as low, medium, or high quality depending on the comprehensiveness and

methodological robustness of reported psychometric testing according to the EMERGE scoring rubric. Measures lacking any reported psychometric evidence receive a “no information” score.

IV. Evaluating Ease-of-Use of Empowerment Measures

Ease-of-use scoring assesses the feasibility of applying each measure in diverse research or program contexts. Criteria include instrument length, clarity and cultural adaptability of items, availability of scoring or administration instructions, literacy requirements, and suitability for varied data collection environments. High-scoring measures tend to be short, clearly structured, and easily translated or adapted, while low-scoring measures may be complex, lengthy, or insufficiently documented for practical use.

DATA ANALYSIS

For this report, we analyzed what we measure (constructs and domains covered in the empowerment measures literature), who we measure (populations of focus in empowerment measures by gender and age and country), who leads measurement studies (LMIC authors and in-country authors), and the quality of empowerment measures we see in terms of psychometrics and ease of use. Analyses were stratified across three publication periods—pre-2000, 2000–2015, and 2016–2025—to evaluate potential shifts in global gender and development priorities. Figures included in this report visualize changes in the number, population focus, psychometric quality, and geographic distribution of measures across time.

As of the most recent EMERGE data update (January 2026), the EMERGE website includes over 1,300 empowerment-related measures, spanning all empowerment domains, approximately 1,200 of which could be evaluated and scored based on the quality criteria and are included in these results.

WHAT WE MEASURE

Growth Across Domains: Across periods, the number of empowerment measures added to the EMERGE website increased substantially, particularly after 2016.

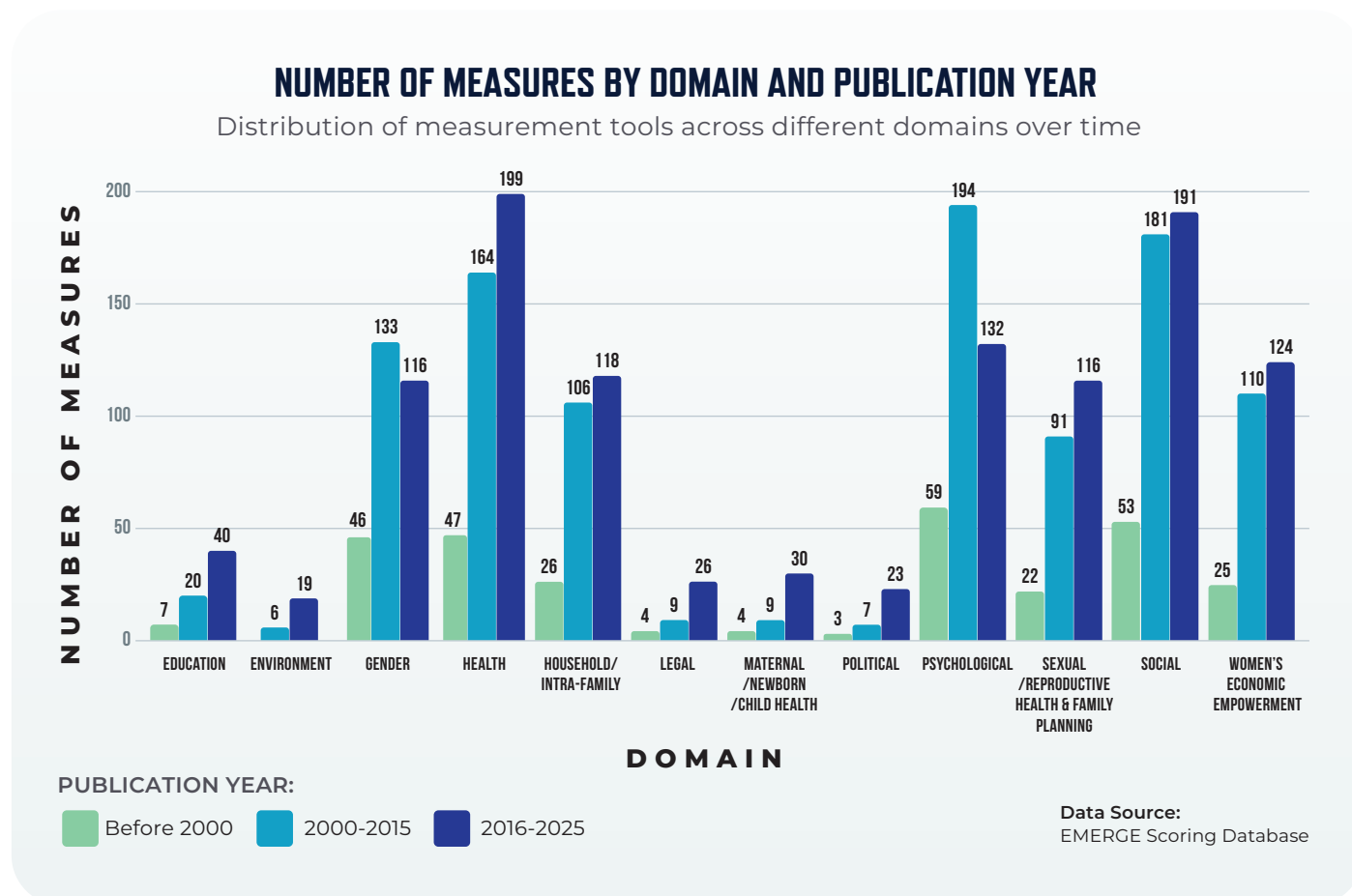


Figure 1. Number of measures by domain and publication year.

The most rapid growth occurred in psychological, social, economic, gender/GBV, household/intrafamilial, health, and SRH/FP domains. In contrast, political, legal, educational, and environmental empowerment domains remain sparsely represented, suggesting that these major components of gender empowerment receive inadequate measurement focus.

Evolving Constructs: Constructs within domains also evolved over time. Early measures in psychological empowerment tended to emphasize the constructs of self-esteem and self-efficacy, while later measures incorporated multidimensional models of agency and autonomy. Social empowerment measures expanded from norms-centered constructs to include mobility, community engagement, and social support. Economic empowerment moved beyond norms and attitudes towards measures of asset

control, financial access, labor participation, and decision-making. SRH constructs increasingly included aspects of quality of care and contraceptive autonomy, but measures of sexual pleasure, adolescent autonomy, and provider bias remain limited. With recognition that the breadth of measures included can impede understanding of how we saw changes over time in constructs within a given area, we provide two case examples:

- 1. **Gender-Based Violence (GBV):** Measurement of GBV became more diverse, capturing intimate partner violence, sexual violence, harassment, cyberviolence, and family-level violence. However, constructs related to perpetration, institutional accountability, and violence affecting men, boys, and gender-diverse populations remain limited.
- 2. **Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH):** SRH measurement consistently emphasized contraceptive decision-making, autonomy, and interaction with health systems. In contrast, adolescent SRH agency, sexual well-being, and structural drivers of SRH empowerment receive inadequate attention.

WHO WE MEASURE

Age Representation. Available measures overwhelmingly target adults. Adolescents appear infrequently, and early adolescents (ages 10–14) are nearly absent.

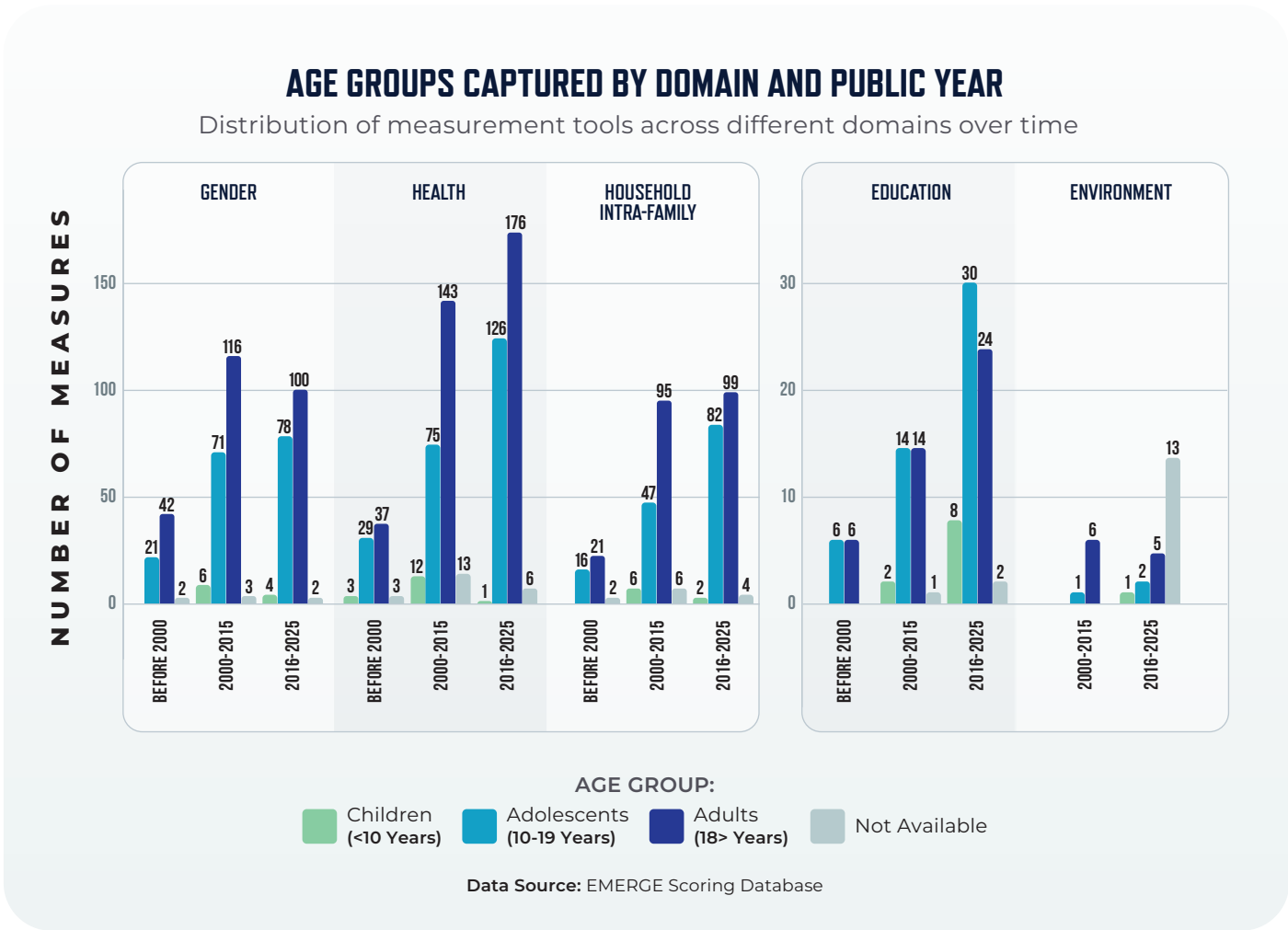
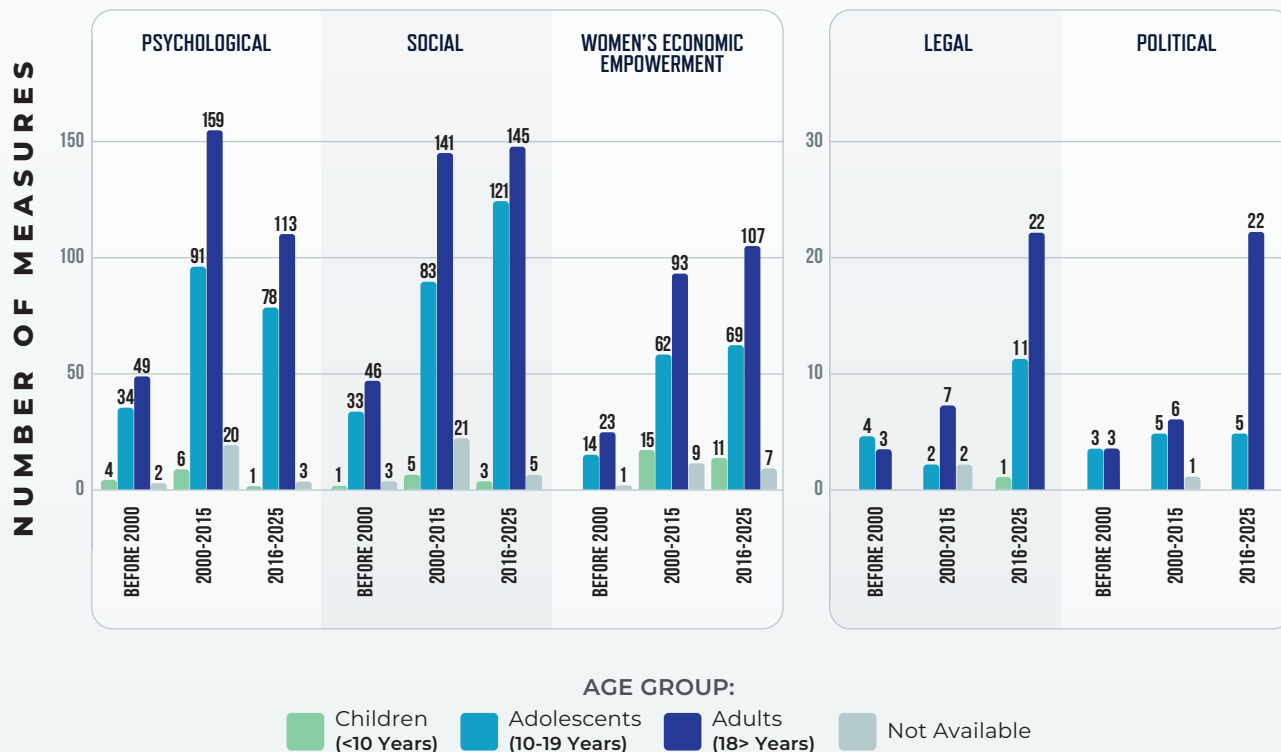


Figure 2a. Distribution of measurement tools across age groups captured by domain and publication year.

AGE GROUPS CAPTURED BY DOMAIN AND PUBLIC YEAR

Distribution of measurement tools across different domains over time



Data Source: EMERGE Scoring Database

Figure 2b. Distribution of measurement tools across age groups captured by domain and publication year.

This imbalance limits understanding of empowerment through the life-course and hampers efforts to design interventions timed to developmental transitions.

Gender Representation. Cisgender women dominate empowerment measure study samples, with limited inclusion of cisgender men, transgender people, nonbinary people, and LGBTQ+ communities.

GENDERS CAPTURED BY DOMAIN AND PUBLICATION YEAR

Distribution of measurement tools across different domains over time



Figure 3. Genders captured by domain and publication year.

This lack of gender diversity in available studies constrains relational and structural analyses of empowerment.

WHO DEVELOPED THE MEASURES?

Measurement science is largely generated in a small number of high-income countries (HIC) and a limited set of LMIC hubs. This concentration is reflected in the disproportionately higher representation of HIC authors, even as testing sites are more often located in LMICs.

Countries with active author leadership are most commonly high-income countries , including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands. We also see good representation of LMIC scholars from India, South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nigeria.

In contrast, large global regions—including Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, the Caribbean, Pacific Islands, much of Latin America, and substantial portions of West and Central Africa—remain minimally represented.

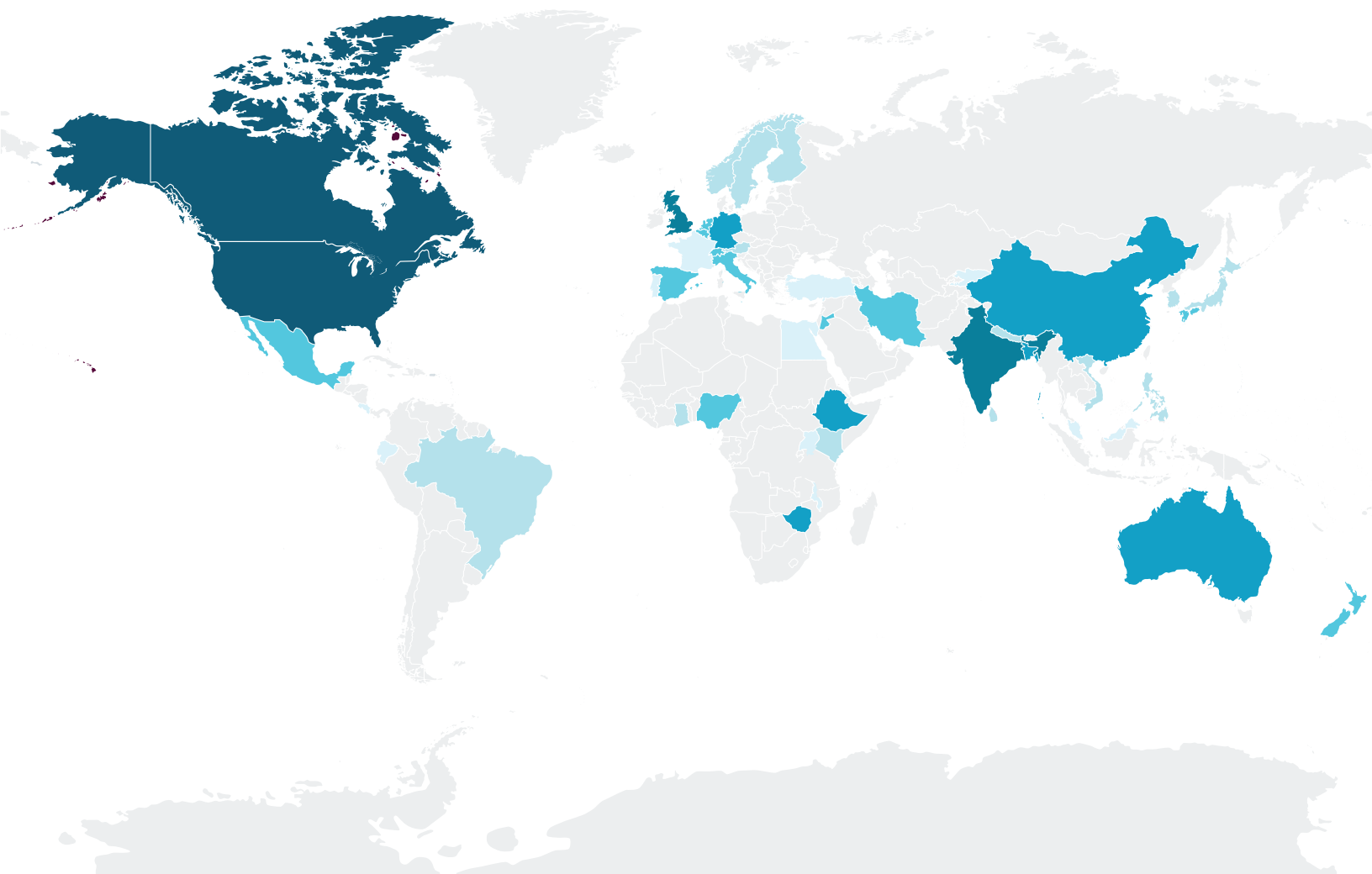


Figure 4. Geographic distribution of measurement tools by country of primary author



NUMBER OF MEASURES

DISTRIBUTION OF PSYCHOMETRIC QUALITY SCORES BY PUBLICATION YEAR

Quality assessment of measurement tools across publication periods

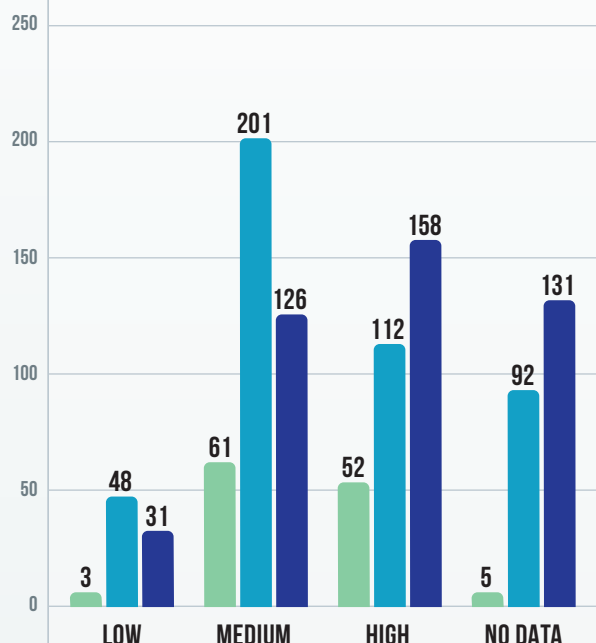


Figure 6

DISTRIBUTION OF EASE OF USE SCORES BY PUBLICATION YEAR

Ease of use assessment of measurement tools across publication periods

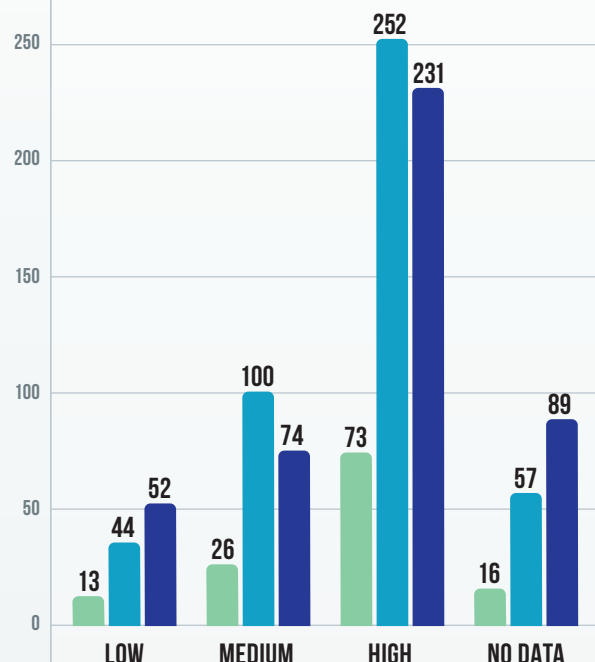


Figure 7

PSYCHOMETRIC QUALITY SCORE

PUBLICATION YEAR: ■ Before 2000 ■ 2000-2015 ■ 2016-2025

Data Source: EMERGE Scoring Database

QUALITY OF MEASURES

PSYCHOMETRIC QUALITY (Figure 6)

Psychometric quality reported by studies improved markedly over time.

High-quality measures became more common after 2016, particularly in GBV, psychological empowerment, household empowerment, and SRH domains. Political, legal, and environmental measures remain low with varies psychometric testing.

EASE OF USE (Figure 7)

Ease-of-use scores, based on readability, scoring clarity and length, showed moderate improvement over time but remained variable.

Many instruments remain long, technically complex, or difficult to adapt for low-literacy or adolescent populations. Longer measures allow for more comprehensive analysis of a construct and facilitate stronger reliability scoring, but cannot easily be used in large surveys designed to capture numerous constructs across national settings.

This review of the EMERGE platform shows that gender empowerment measurement has expanded substantially in volume, conceptual clarity, and psychometric rigor, particularly since 2016. Growth has been most pronounced in psychological, social, economic, GBV, and SRH domains—areas closely aligned with global development and health priorities. These trends suggest that investments, normative guidance, and availability of validated tools shape what the field measures. At the same time, persistent under-measurement of political, legal, environmental, and structural empowerment reveals important blind spots that constrain the field’s ability to assess systemic change.

Findings also highlight enduring inequities in who is measured and who leads empowerment-focused measurement science. Measures overwhelmingly focus on adult cisgender women, with limited attention to early adolescents, men and boys, gender-diverse populations, and older adults. This restricts understanding of empowerment as a relational and life-course process and limits the field’s capacity to design or evaluate interventions that address power dynamics beyond women alone. Similarly, while measurement is often conducted in LMIC settings, authorship and conceptual leadership remain concentrated in a small number of high-income countries and select LMIC hubs, reinforcing asymmetries in knowledge production.

Encouragingly, psychometric quality has improved markedly. However, ease of use remains variable, reflecting a tension between researcher’s desire for comprehensive measurement and lengthier measures versus implementer priorities and needs for feasibility, time and cost in large-scale or low-resource surveys. This tension has become more acute as the possible contraction of DHS and VACS threatens the infrastructure that has historically enabled population-level empowerment measurement. Together, these findings suggest that while the science of empowerment measurement has matured, its future depends on coordinated investments in both conceptual innovation and data systems capable of sustaining global, comparable measurement.



GENDER EMPOWERMENT MEASUREMENT IN THE POST-2030 AGENDA

Over the past decade, EMERGE has made a foundational contribution to the field by professionalizing gender empowerment measurement through conceptual clarity, systematic curation, psychometric evaluation, and global capacity building. By making high-quality measures visible, comparable, and accessible, EMERGE has helped shift empowerment from a loosely defined aspiration to a measurable, theory-driven construct suitable for research, policy, and program evaluation. These advances have been recognized by global institutions and integrated into emerging standards for gender data and accountability.

At the same time, this synthesis makes clear that expansion alone is insufficient. Gaps in domain coverage, population inclusion, geographic representation, and measurement feasibility limit the field's ability to capture empowerment in its full structural and relational complexity. As the global community moves toward a post-2030 agenda—amid uncertainty about major survey platforms—the question is no longer whether empowerment should be measured, but whether it will be measured in ways that are relevant, inclusive, rigorous, and sustainable. EMERGE's first decade provides both a roadmap and a warning for what is required to meet that challenge.

The next phase of empowerment measurement will require deliberate action on three fronts.

- 1. Global data infrastructure must be protected, encouraged, and modernized.** Preserving DHS, VACS, or developing analogous regionally led platforms is essential to ensure population-level, longitudinal, and cross-national empowerment data.
- 2. Measurement priorities must expand** beyond individual agency to include collective agency, political participation, legal power, environmental conditions, digital safety and empowerment, and institutional accountability—domains critical to structural gender equality and empowerment yet currently under-measured.
- 3. Equity in measurement leadership and population inclusion must be strengthened.** Investments are needed to support LMIC-led measure development including multilingual publication, and training in underrepresented regions, alongside intentional inclusion of adolescents, gender-diverse populations, men and boys, older adults, and displaced communities in measure development and testing efforts.

The next decade will determine whether empowerment measurement is sustained as a global public good or allowed to fragment under shrinking data systems, with profound consequences for gender equality and empowerment research, action, and impact.



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