



A Conceptual Framework for Measuring Empowerment

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Background: Why Conceptualize Empowerment for Measurement?

Gender inequalities -- i.e., unfair treatment, unequal opportunities, or unequal burden based on sex or gender -- compromise health and development worldwide, with consequences of such inequities being greatest for the most socially marginalized women and girls in low- and middle-income countries (1, 2). To monitor and assess the success of the increasing attempts to improve gender equality and empowerment across the globe, a more comprehensive array of scientifically valid measures are needed (3). Data driven policy changes are showing great effect in key areas of health and development, such as infant mortality, universal education, and access to potable water(3). Unfortunately, the science of gender measures has lagged behind the rapid expansion of programs and policies being made under United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (UN SDG5), which focuses on improving gender equality and empowerment, hindering our ability to assess these efforts. Valid and reliable measures of the many facets of gender equality and empowerment that are broadly accepted and distributed, and used in a consistent manner to assess change across monitoring and evaluation studies, will significantly advance global efforts to improve health and development via improving the autonomy and opportunities for women and girls. To that end, the EMERGE Platform was developed, a one-stop shop for best evidence gender measures.

EMERGE [Evidence-based Measures of Empowerment for Research on Gender Equality] is an initiative created to strengthen the development, recognition, and use of rigorous gender measures for program evaluation and cross-national monitoring. EMERGE aims to improve the science of gender equality and empowerment measurement, by conceptualizing and operationalizing the empowerment process and inputs into it, by compiling and conducting a psychometric evaluation of available measures on a web-based platform, by building a community of practice focused on the science of measurement in the area of gender equality, and by supporting scientifically rigorous development of gender measures from pilot testing of novel concepts to testing measures at scale via multi-country surveys. EMERGE adds to the landscape of SDG5 efforts by supporting and holding a standard of science to measurement as well as profiling women and girls' status and agency as well as influencers of these via data science methods.

While good measurement is fundamental to good data and data driven decision-making, good measurement cannot exist without conceptual understanding of what is to be measured. To that end, EMERGE has worked to conceptualize gender empowerment to guide quantifiable measurement, with inputs from experts from across disciplines. Gender researchers from across fields have provided various theoretical constructs of importance to conceptualize gender empowerment, but these tend to be discipline-specific in nature and approach and not necessarily with the goal of guiding quantitative measurement. We consider in this report the concepts of gender empowerment, and social empowerment more broadly, based on theoretical foundations from across the social sciences, and offer a framework to measure constructs of empowerment, as a process and an outcome, as well as those constructs which may act upon it.

Theories of Empowerment from across Disciplines

As highlighted in our 2017 EMERGE report on theoretical foundations (4), empowerment is both a process and an outcome, where the more vulnerable and marginalized individual or group builds consciousness of and agency against demonstrated discrimination in order to create change in circumstance or structure, allowing their free strategic life choices (5-15). Malhotra further adds that household dynamics are part of these inputs into women and girls' empowerment, given the centrality of women's roles as mother and homemaker as justification for lesser positioning (14). Kabeer's work in this area has received much attention and highlights the constructs and process of the empowerment process-- from critical consciousness to goal setting, to agency and action, and finally, to self-realization of goals. Much of this work has come from the discipline of development economics and builds on Sen's Capabilities Approach (16), which emphasizes "a person's functioning and capabilities: what he or she is able to do or be (e.g. the ability to be well-nourished, to avoid escapable morbidity, to take part in the life of the community." Accordingly, more recent and quantitatively focused work in this area emphasizes the importance of assets, opportunities and resources in supporting the human capabilities and empowerment process (7), but we find that these assets, opportunities and resources are inputs that can affect empowerment but are not in and of themselves empowerment. Rather, Kabeer's definition resonates as constructs of empowerment, as a process and an outcome, for individuals and groups.

The field of psychology further expands on our understanding of empowerment by focusing on capacities rather than capabilities. Capacity is the ability of the individual or group that exists at present, where capability refers to the ability that the individual or group could achieve under the right conditions. Where development economics has focused on structural factors of influence that can help shift capability (the possibility to achieve action) to capacity (existing ability to achieve action), Rappaport's work on psychological empowerment emphasizes the states and traits of the individual or group (e.g., perceived helplessness, group cohesion) as affecting capacity to gain mastery or empowerment over their circumstances (17, 18). For that reason, emphasis is on the internal attributes and cognitions of individuals and groups. At the individual level, research from Bandura and Menon, from social and organizational psychology respectively, demonstrates that self-efficacy, perceived control, goal internalization, and self-regulation related to the behavioral goal are key elements of empowerment, and directly linked to behaviors serving as acts of agency to achieve one's goals (19, 20). Zimmerman expands on this by considering the group or collective, highlighting the importance of intragroup aspects of collective empowerment and the individual cognitive and behavioral characteristics of group engagement and participation in influencing collective agency, in terms of both organizing and collective action (21, 22). This work has been applied to civic participation and political empowerment (22), which focuses on a disadvantaged group increasing political voice and representation via individual-level cognitive beliefs that they can participate and their participation can enact desired change and collective organizing to participant in sufficient numbers for impact (23). These perspectives from psychology add to Kabeer's definition by emphasizing the cognitive-behavioral aspects of the empowerment process (e.g. self-efficacy, goal internalization and conviction) as well as the roles of inter- and intra-group dynamics in affecting the process, with the latter being inputs (as was the case above with assets, resources, and opportunities). Importantly, as noted above psychology also theorizes the role of cognitive-behavioral

states and traits of the individual or group that feed into the empowerment process, factors we can view as internal attributes (17, 18).

As seen in the definitions of empowerment from the disciplines of economics, psychology and political science, central to this concept is recognition of social marginalization as the context in which empowerment occurs. In fact, the ways a power structure/authority socially marginalizes individuals or groups requires empowerment on the part of the marginalized individual or group to achieve self-determination. Friere's work in education take this approach and, like that discussed above in development economics, defines empowerment as a process of self-actualization -- moving from being an object where others determine your actions or opportunities, to becoming a subject with agency to enact change on your life and achieve your self-determined goals (23). Friere posits that the oppressed must first gain critical consciousness of their oppression and the unjustness of it, and then they must guide their own process of empowerment, rather than have it defined by allies or supporters outside of the oppressed group. Otherwise the oppressed remain objects and are denied true agency. This work was heavily influenced by Karl Marx, whose research and theoretical writings explored the roles of capitalism and modernization in creating class conflicts, documenting how and why class oppression can incite violence (24). He theorizes that when the oppressed inevitably resist against those with power over them and seek power to achieve their self-determined goals, power structures will retaliate against this resistance (24). Durkheim, another founder of sociology, also emphasized the role of social positioning in health and well-being, and highlighted that norms and institutions are the key elements in society that marginalize groups (25). In contrast to Marx, he emphasized that social well-being for all is achievable via social solidarity, cohesion, and stability, and does not require violent resistance on the part of the oppressed for social change to occur (25, 26). Growing research on social networks and social cohesion offer opportunity for evidence to support this perspective (27). Hence, again we see from the disciplines of education and sociology a similar emphasis on empowerment as a process beginning with critical consciousness and moving toward autonomy and self-actualization. However, here we find a more central focus on external power structures – in particular, norms and institutions – that affect it, as well as the dynamic interaction between the oppressed and those in power when acts of agency and resultant retaliation occur.

A Conceptual Framework to Measure Empowerment

Based on the review of empowerment theories, we find that there is much uniformity across disciplines regarding the process of empowerment. We assimilate these theories in a core model for the measurement of empowerment, featured in Figure 1.

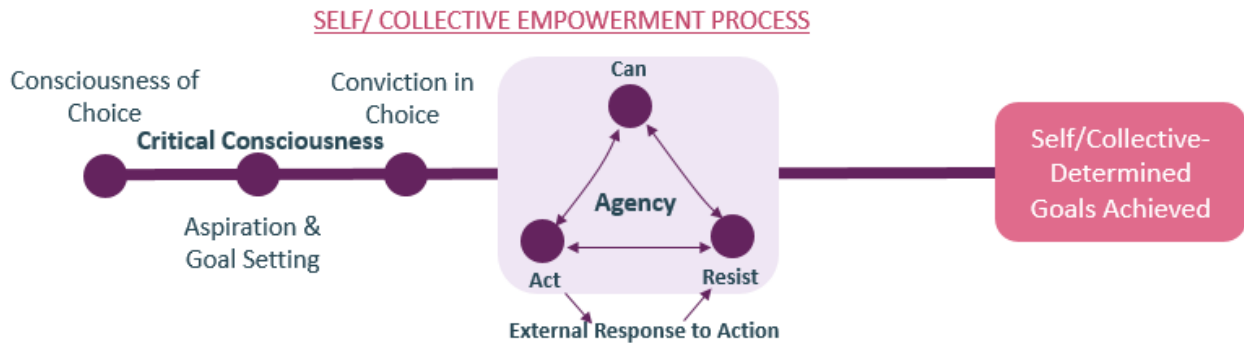


Figure 1 The Empowerment Process for Individuals and Collectives

The steps of empowerment are as follows:

- *Critical Consciousness and Choice*
 - *Gain Consciousness of Choice*, for a choice beyond what you are allowed or expected based on social characteristics such as gender.
 - *Aspire and Goal Set One's Choice*, creating a plan for how to achieve it.
 - *Feel Conviction in that Choice*, as there may be many barriers or costs to working toward the choice, it is reasonable to vacillate in the decision. Acting on the choice is easier when you have confidence in the choice you are making.
- *Agency to Act on Choice* and achieve self-determined goals. Agency can result in *backlash* or *retaliation* from those with power over you, and *resistance* from you in the face of backlash.
- *Achieve Your Self-Determined Goals* and gain self-determination and self-actualization

While this process looks linear, it is not. An individual or collective can engage in agency without fully holding conviction in choice, or they may have consciousness of choice but not wish to engage in that choice. Additionally, the individual or collective may engage in acts of agency, receive backlash for their efforts (punishment or retaliation) from external forces, and fall back to a place where they no longer perceive of choices beyond what those in power allows. Alternatively, they may find external support for their acts of agency, facilitating their agency to result in achievement of their self-determined goals. Importantly, this model also posits that individuals and collectives are increasingly empowered by traversing through the stages of the process and that completion of all the stages is not necessary to be empowered.

Critical Consciousness

Critical Consciousness of Choice

Our framework to measure empowerment is informed by Freire's ideas on Critical Consciousness as a process by which oppressed individuals and collectives first applying critical thinking to assess their

current situation, and develop an understanding of the roots of their problem inclusive of social determinants of inequalities they face (24, 28). Solutions to address the identified problems are developed only after recognition that the problems exist and are due to inequalities or unfair treatment attributable to a social characteristic AND that change of circumstance is an option under their control AND that they have the right to execute that option or choice. Freire identifies lack of awareness as a key tool that helps maintain oppression and underscores that it is not only a lack of knowledge, but also a lack of critical thinking skills and questioning of power structures that perpetuate oppression of groups (29). Friere further highlights two levels of critical consciousness. The first level relates to recognition by individuals and collectives that their choices are limited and that these limitations are rooted in social norms and expectations based on their current social position or marginalization due to social characteristics (e.g. sex, race / ethnicity or an intersection of these determinants). The second level of consciousness is the ability of individuals and collectives to recognize that they have choices beyond the limited paths / options presented to them and applying their critical thinking to identify, implement and evaluate alternate choices (28). Hence, critical consciousness of oppression and entitlement of choice are foundational to the empowerment process, paving the way for acts of agency and change.

Aspiration and Goal Setting

Once there is awareness of choice against doctrine, so to speak, via critical consciousness, there must be the decision to make that aspirational choice. To that end, we must recognize the distinction between choice and decision. In the context of empowerment, some have viewed choice to be related to desired intention, values and beliefs whereas decision connects to behavior and actions (30). In this view, choice may be seen as mental acts of making a choice that precedes decision to act on this choice, and is therefore different from overt actions from being performed (31). This is related to the idea of continuum of motivational styles in Self-Determination Theory that can range from heteronomous (regulated from outside the phenomenal self) to autonomous (being self-governed). In this sense, consciousness of choice is linked with self-determination view of autonomy and leads to actions that are regulated by internal rather than external prompts (32). However, we more simply view choice and critical consciousness of choice as recognizing available options, as described above and as is consistent with Friere's views, where aspiration and goal setting is the mental decision-making to act on choice that is against doctrine or social expectations. The jump from choice to aspiration and goal setting is thus a leap.

Conviction in choice

With recognition that the decision to aspire for change can be difficult, particularly in the face of severe social sanctions or disapproval, conviction in choice must be considered part of the empowerment process as well, bridging choice to aspiration for change to action (33). Uncertainty is of course reasonable given the backlash and individual or group may face in engaging in behaviors against social rules. Conviction may only come with time and building of internal and/or external supports, but given the difficulties of engaging actions against the will or desire of power structures that oppress, unwavering conviction and commitment to change is often required to move from aspiration to action, especially if there is backlash.

Agency as Can-Act-Resist

We expand focus on how to measure agency by highlighting its elements as Can-Act-Resist. (Figure 2):

- *Can* is the actors' capacities or efficacy (self-efficacy or collective efficacy) to engage in actions against or inconsistent with the power structure; these can be perceived or actual efficacy, as both influence action. Efficacy or control over resources or assets would be included here.
- *Act* is the actions of individuals or collectives that are aligned to their choices and goals and may or may not be against those defined by the power structure for them. Actions can include giving voice or communicating one's goals, decision-making about issues affecting one's goals, or simply engaging in direct actions to achieve one's goals. These actions may occur with the knowledge and input from those in positions of power and authority over the actors (e.g., communication), or without the knowledge of those in position of power (e.g., covert activities)
 - When actors "Act", they may face *External Response*, positive or negative, to their actions from those in power or those carrying out the will of those in power (i.e., enforcers). External response can be negative, positive, or absent, as noted above. However, the nature of negative reaction is complex, and can include punishment, suppression, or discrediting.
- *Resist* is a consequence of negative external response, when actors continue to act despite the backlash they face. Here, as with "Act," resistance behaviors can be with or outside of the knowledge of those with power over the actor. However, when resistance involves engagement with someone with power or authority over the action, bargaining/negotiation is required, and may mean giving up something of value.

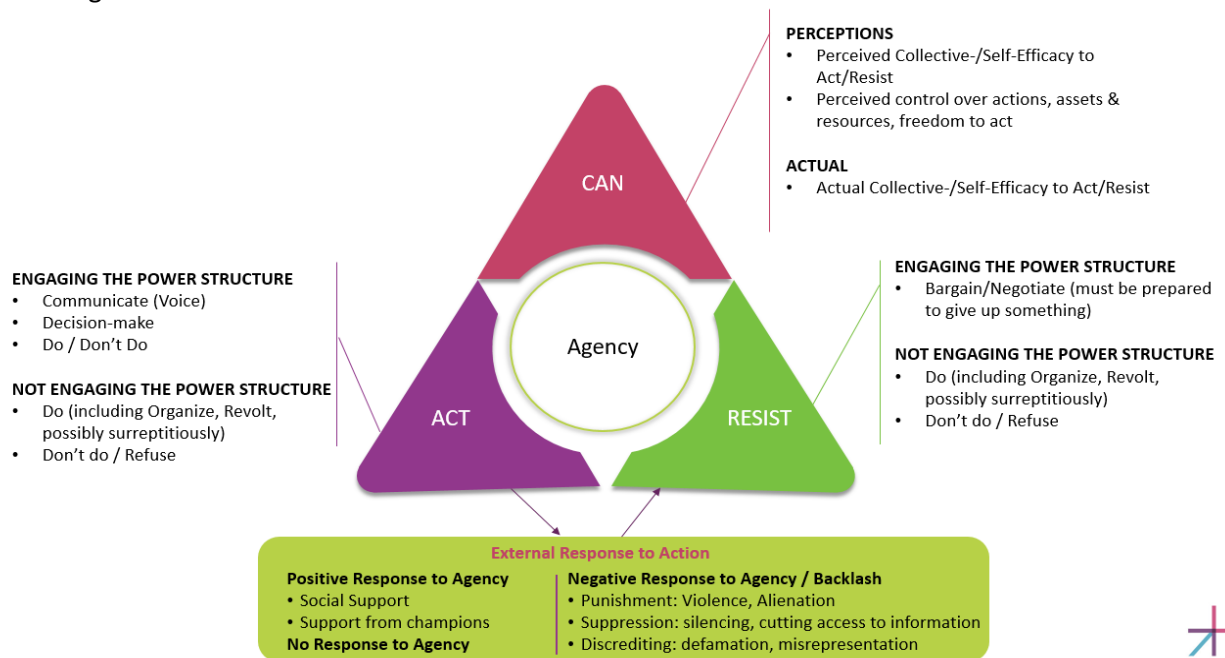


Figure 2: Agency as Can-Act-Resist

Achieving Self-Determined Goals

What is self-determination?

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) describes self-determination as the right of people to determine their own destiny (34). Self-determination is a general principal of law protected under the United Nations Charter (35). Exercise of this right can have a range of different outcomes depending on the choice of actions. In the context of the empowerment theory, we consider self-determination to be the freedom of individuals or collectives to live or act without consultation or approval from others. The framework focuses on the right of individuals or collectives to determine their own actions and goals, irrespective of the outcome of the choice. This is again aligned to the idea of autonomy in Self-Deterministic Theory (36) in that self-determined acts reflect one's will or a full endorsement when acting in accord with external expectations.

What does it mean to achieve self-determined goals?

Our framework recognizes that achievement of self-determined goals can vary immensely based on context and the entity setting the goal. Depending upon the self-determination of an individual, a collective, or a people, achieving self-determined goals can range from delaying childbirth to affecting changes in social norms, to changing the political outcomes of an election. The framework also identifies that achievement of self-determined goals can have substantial temporal variations, with some self-determined goals being achieved sooner while others may take a long time in realization.

The framework also recognizes that achieving one's goal does not necessarily mean that their lives are fully altered as a result of achieving self-determined goals and allows for goals that are small and those that are comprehensive to life. However, the framework underscores that achieving self-determined goals, irrespective of its scale, can engender an environment of empowerment for individuals and collectives.

Measuring Inputs into the Empowerment Process

As seen in Figure 3 below, and as noted in our above described theoretical foundations, there are many inputs into the empowerment process, and these can facilitate or impede that process.

- *Internal Attributes* of the individual or group: a) the psychology of the individual or collective and b) the intra-group dynamics of the collective

Internal attributes can either facilitate or inhibit the empowerment process. They include psychological attributes of the individual or collective and intra-group dynamics of the collective. Psychological attributes of the individual or collective can act as facilitators when they involve less restrictive attitudes or beliefs, knowledge of choices, positive internal affect (e.g. optimism, trust, empathy) and psychological resilience (e.g., coping, intrinsic motivation). A lack of these attributes, however, can act as inhibitors to the process. Similarly, intra-group dynamics such as cohesion, consensus building, social support etc. can act as facilitators of the empowerment process for collectives, where the absence of or weakness in these can inhibit collective empowerment. Internal attributes influence each stage in the empowerment process. For example, at an individual level, knowledge and awareness effects consciousness of choice. Less restrictive attitudes and beliefs can inform aspiration and goal setting. Positive internal affect can influence conviction in choice and actions and psychological resilience can help individuals resist external power structures.

- *External Context* of the individual or group: a) social structures and institutions of the individual or collective, b) community and household factors of the individual or collective, and c) the intergroup dynamics of the collective

Like internal attributes, external context can also facilitate or inhibit the empowerment process. Borrowing from our multidisciplinary theory analysis of empowerment, we find external factors of influence on empowerment fall into the following realms: social structures and institutions in which individuals and collectives operate, more proximal community and household dynamics of the individuals and collectives, and inter-group dynamics for collectives. As described in our theory review, the fields of sociology and political science highlight the importance of external structures and policies that can facilitate or impede empowerment. A more unified and empathetic society, with social protections and security, trusted and stable political and legal spaces, and low or no corruption in the political sphere as well in public services and programs can support empowerment, including political and social empowerment of marginalized groups. In contrast, more atomized societies, characterized by conflict, instability, distrust in social and government systems, and widespread corruption not only compromises well-being of societies, it also impedes empowerment of the marginalized and in fact may very well foster greater backlash against acts of empowerment. The more immediate environment of community and household also affect empowerment, as it is here where assets, resources, and opportunity structures may be available, and where household dynamic may be fostering of women and girls' consciousness of choice and agency. Intergroup dynamics also influence whether a collective can effectively act and achieve goals, depending on whether they have connections and alliances with other collectives, or positive recognition by those with power over them. We can view these external sets of factors as influencing each other, even as they influence the individual or collective actors of empowerment, in accordance with Ecological Systems Theory (37). Hence, while the model looks fairly linear in Figure 3, it operates under multiple layers of influence – societal, community and family, collective, and individual, and the inner layers (e.g., individual and collective) can influence family, community, and society, just as these layers influence them and each other.

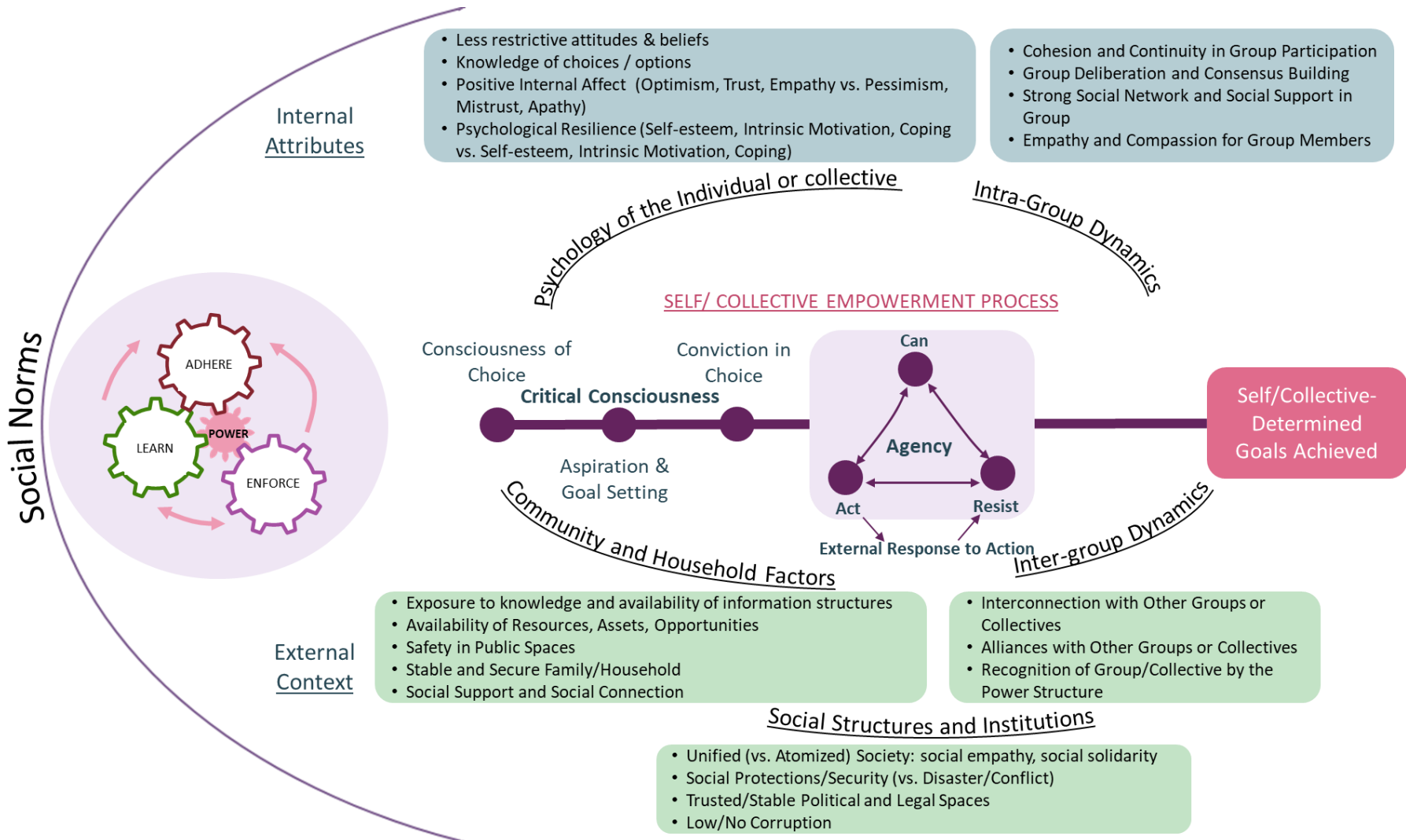


Figure 3: Conceptual Model for Measuring the Empowerment Process and Inputs Affecting It

Note: While the model highlights the role of internal attributes and external contexts as inputs into the empowerment process, it is crucial to note that **empowerment of individuals and collectives has the potential to influence the internal attributes and transform external contexts and norms as well**. Hence, the empowerment process itself can result in alteration not only of the individual or collective seeking empowerment, but also to the external context- institutions and norms – surrounding them. This model only focuses on positive attributes and contexts which act as facilitators in the empowerment process. Negative attributes and contexts will act as barriers.

The Centrality of Social Norms in Affecting Empowerment

Social Norms encompass the individual, collective, and external environment (societal, community and family). Individuals live their lives as members of communities influenced by social factors, including social norms, and by broader environmental factors.

Social norms influence and uphold behavior and reinforce social inequities. Social norms affect the core empowerment process directly through consciousness of choice, aspiration and goal setting and conviction, as well as by shaping internal attributes and external context that in turn facilitate or constrain empowerment. Social norms refer to the informal rules, often unspoken and unwritten, that govern which behaviors are appropriate within a given group (38-40). They are the rules that govern a behavior, not the behavior itself. Social norms that are perceptions of typical behavior, or expectations about what people do, are called descriptive norms. Perceptions of what others consider appropriate, or expectations about what people should do, are called injunctive norms (40). Norms exist within a complex web of culture, influenced by belief systems, embedded in formal and informal institutions and produced through social interactions (41).

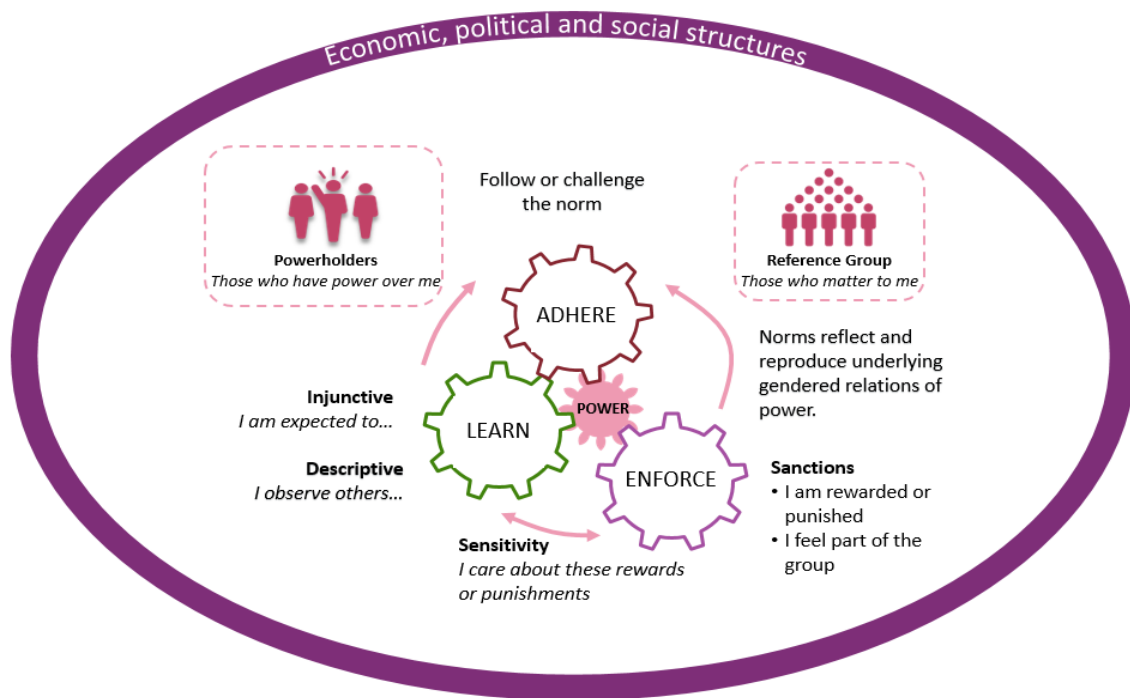


Figure 4: Conceptual Model for Measuring Social Norms: Learn-Adhere-Enforce

To operationalize social norms into measurable constructs, we use the **Learn-Adhere-Enforce** framework, as shown in Figure 4:

- *Power* is at the core of social norms because they reflect and reproduce underlying gendered relations of power (42). Hierarchies of power in groups and communities ensure that power holders benefit from the status quo. Power holders often enforce compliance with social norms that uphold their power and privilege and resist normative shifts.

- *Learn* happens from infancy throughout the life cycle as individuals observe how others behave and internalize social expectations. These socialization mechanisms align with categorization of norms into descriptive and injunctive norms (see above).
 - *Descriptive*: Perceptions of what people do or what “I observe others” doing
 - *Injunctive*: Perceptions of what people do or the understanding of what “I am expected to” do or “I should do” according to others.
- *Adhere* follows learning of social norms, where the individual either complies with or challenges the norm. People who challenge norms or do not comply under specific circumstances are often referred to as changemakers or positive deviants. Individuals may comply with a norm because they do not have the wherewithal to challenge it, fear negative sanctions or seek benefit or rewards, such as social approval for compliance.
- *Enforcement* of a norm is carried out through *sanctions* (rewards or punishments) for adhering to or deviating from a social norm. Some follow a norm because they want to demonstrate group membership.
- *Sensitivity* to sanctions determines how well they work. The degree to which individuals care about the rewards or punishments tied to adherence to a norm may influence their behavior.
- *Strength* of a norm can be assessed by measuring people’s expectations of the social consequences (sanctions or rewards) of complying with or deviating from a norm. The strength of a norm may be a useful indicator of how amenable it is to change.
- *Powerholders* are those who those who have “power over” the actor, while the *reference group* is defined as people whose opinion or behavior matters for a behavior or context (39, 43). A reference group may include individuals who enforce behaviors through rewards or punishment, or individuals who serve as role models. They are the group individuals turn to for guidance on the social rules for a given behavior. Norms are typically sustained by more than one reference group, and their influence may have different weight or even go in different directions.

Conclusion

As seen in our review of theories and EMERGE conceptual framework for the measurement of empowerment, empowerment is a process and an outcome predicated on a social hierarchy in which an individual or group is constrained in choice and action by a power structure under which they operate and due to social characteristics that are often beyond their control. Empowerment thus involves a shift in mind and action occurring at the level of the individual or group, from **critical consciousness** and recognition of choices beyond what is socially sanctioned and choosing to act in ways non-adherent to the power structure (*Consciousness of choice-Aspiration-Conviction*), to **agency** in the form of clear and direct actions against what is socially sanctioned (*Can-Act-Resist*) to **achievement of self-determined goals**. The process of empowerment is heavily influenced by the internal attributes, both strengths and weaknesses, of the individual or group seeking empowerment (e.g., trust, motivation), as well as by the external social, political, economic, and familial contexts inclusive of supports (e.g., assets, resources) and impediments (e.g., social alienation and backlash), all of which is influenced by underlying social norms that dictate position, behaviors and opportunities based on social characteristics and positioning.

This framework suggests that there are a number of measurable constructs of individual and collective empowerment as a process and an outcome as well as of the social norms and internal and multi-level and multi-layered external factors affecting empowerment. Further, these measures can be further refined and adapted to particular areas of focus such as women's economic empowerment, girl education, or reproductive health, and for specific contexts and populations. Hence, the measures could be innumerable to capture the varied aspects of gender empowerment, and with considerations of intersectionality. To that end, we do not recommend a comprehensive assessment within a single study to understand this complex issue. Rather, we offer the framework as a guide for use across studies that, with time and breadth of study, can support a better understanding of leverage points – in the empowerment process or in the factors that affect it - for change via program and policy.

At the same time, guidance is needed regarding key targets of empowerment that can be captured at scale and across nations for SDG5. A review of existing targets suggest inadequate measurement of direct constructs of empowerment, but rather reliance on proxy indicators such as victimization from violence. Next steps for this work must be clear indicators of empowerment in the areas of consciousness of choice, agency, and achievement of self-determined goals, as well as the norms dictating the restrictions to choice. However, these indicators must also be in key areas of meaning and influence, such as in political realms, economic and financial systems, health, environment, and education. Application of the framework to build our gender measures in these areas must be the focus of next step work in our field, and as we write this report in January 2021, with 10 years remaining for the achievement of SDG5, development of these gender measures must be prioritized now if we are going to have markers in the coming years to track true achievement of gender equality and empowerment.

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