Understanding women’s empowerment: The interplay between personal and relational empowerment

Marloes Huis – m.a.huis@rug.nl
Dr. Nina Hansen, Prof. dr. Sabine Otten, & Prof. dr. Robert Lensink

Throughout history and across nations still today, men on average are superior to women in terms of power. Especially in developing nations patriarchy and gender inequality are still prevalent. Empowering women is seen as important step to accelerate economic development and as one of the central issues in the process of sustainable development for many nations worldwide.

This research defines women’s empowerment and investigates the relation between different dimensions.

Women’s empowerment

“The expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437)

Women’s empowerment entails a process from being un-empowered to becoming empowered.

The Three-Dimensional Women’s Empowerment Model proposes that women’s empowerment can be differentiated at three distinct dimensions:

- the micro-level: personal empowerment - individuals’ personal beliefs and actions
- the meso-level: relational empowerment - beliefs and actions in relation to relevant others
- the macro-level: societal empowerment - outcomes in the broader societal context

Economic development alone cannot result in the development of women’s empowerment. To achieve change towards more equality, both parties of the relationship need to be involved.

The pathways through which the process of women’s empowerment occurs it shaped by specific contexts and strongly influenced by laws, social norms and cultural practices. People in collectivistic societies give meaning to their identity through relationships with others.

Personal & Relational empowerment

Decision making power

Main measures:

- **Self-esteem** (Rosenberg, 1965) e.g., I am able to do things as well as most other people (6 items; M = 3.72, SD = 0.68, range = 1 - 5)
- **Relational quality** (Straus, 1979, WHO, 2005) e.g., How often did your spouse physically assault you in the last six months? (Reversed: 4 items; M = 4.65, SD = 0.41, range = 1 - 5)
- **Decision making power** (Banerjee et al., 2015) Small expenditures: e.g., Who makes most decisions about what food items to purchase? (3 items; M = 2.42, SD = 0.69, range = 0 - 3) Large expenditures: e.g., Who makes most decisions about where to invest surplus money? (8 items; M = 4.08, SD = 1.58, range = 0 - 8)

**Research questions:**

- How do the three dimensions of personal, relational and societal empowerment influence each other?
- How do these dimensions of women’s empowerment relate to the process of sustainable development?
- To what extent does the empowerment process influence related outcomes such as decision making power?

**Method:**

Sample: 1509 Vietnamese female entrepreneurs (M_age = 44.7, SD = 10.0)

**Main measures:**

- **Self-esteem**
- **Relational quality**
- **Decision making power**

**Results:**

- **Personal empowerment:**
  - Small expenditures: e.g., Who makes most decisions about what food items to purchase? (3 items; M = 2.42, SD = 0.69, range = 0 - 3)
  - Large expenditures: e.g., Who makes most decisions about where to invest surplus money? (8 items; M = 4.08, SD = 1.58, range = 0 - 8)

**Conclusion**

- To understand women’s empowerment it is important to differentiate between personal, relational, and societal dimensions.
- Relational dynamics are crucial in the development of women’s empowerment.

**References:**