

Does family planning use empower women?

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Women's reproductive agency and women's empowerment

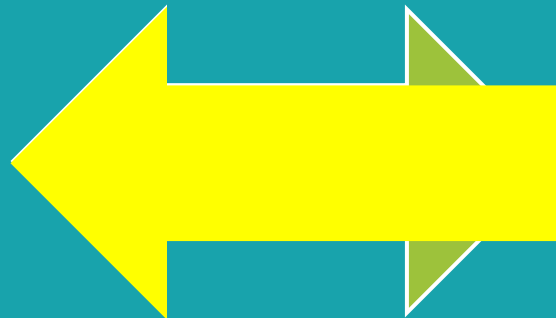
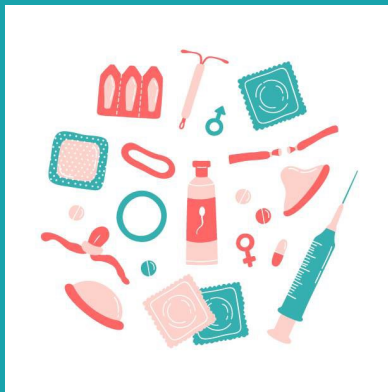
Assumption that women's reproductive agency and women's empowerment are associated

For the case of this presentation, I will focus on access to family planning as an indicator of women's reproductive agency

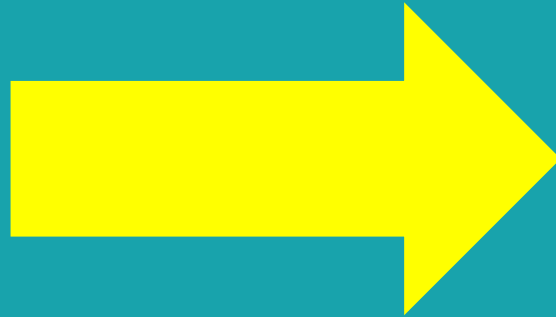
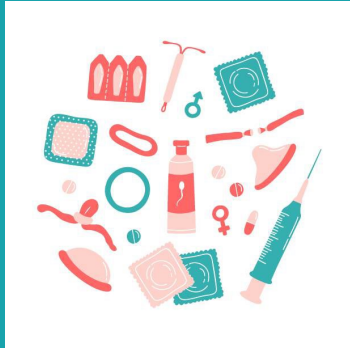
Most research has not evaluated a *causal relationship* between family planning and women's empowerment

- Lack of clear temporality and directionality

Where directionality has been measured, much of the focus has been on if more empowered women are more likely to use family planning



What about the reverse?



Does family planning access lead to changes in women's empowerment?

Findings from a systematic scoping review

How do we measure women's empowerment? What are resources, agency, and achievement?

Resources

- Education
- Employment
- Wealth
- Financial autonomy

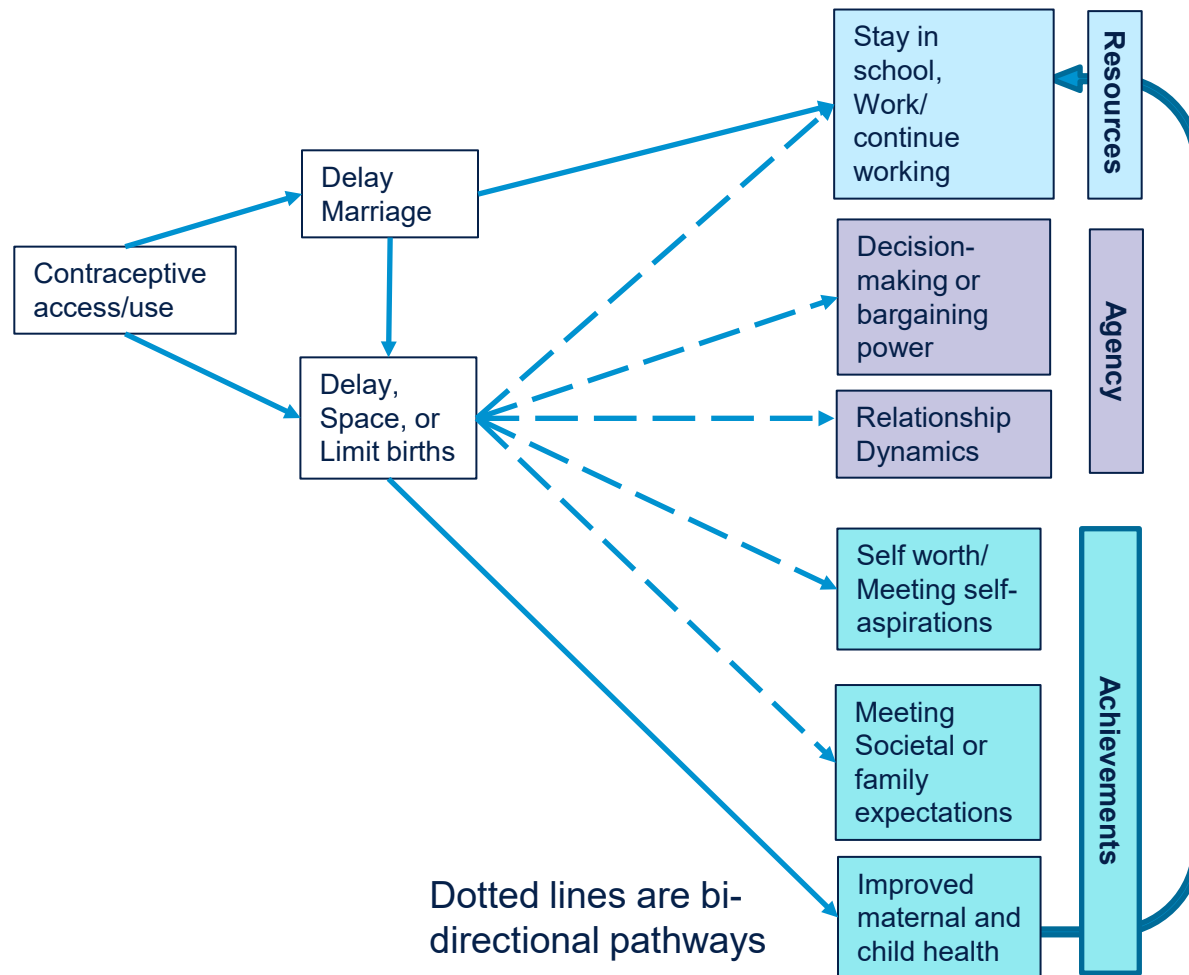
Agency

- Empowerment: Agency, voice, intrinsic agency, power, status, autonomy
- Women's power in household decision-making
- Mobility/freedom of movement
- Marriage relationship characteristics
- Control by partner

Achievements

- Gender attitudes beliefs and gender norms
- Exposure to public life
- Aspirations
- Self-efficacy
- Maternal and child health outcomes?

Conceptual model of family planning access/use and women's empowerment



To answer this, we conducted a systematic scoping review

- **Population/ participants:** Women of reproductive age (15-49 years)
- **Types of interventions/predictors:** Intervention or policy that aim to increase family planning use (access) or family planning use measured as current or ever use
- **Outcomes:** Empowerment
 - Since empowerment is a fuzzy concept to define and measure, we include a broad range of measures that have been conceptualized as empowerment. To be included, studies should report a quantitative measure of the effect of family planning use on empowerment or agency.
- **Types of studies:** Relevant peer-reviewed articles that include the following: study designs
 - Randomized controlled trial (RCT), cluster randomized controlled trials (c-RCTs), controlled clinical trials (CCTs);
 - Quasi-experimental studies including regression discontinuity design, difference-in-differences, controlled before and after (CBA) studies, pre-post designs, etc.; and
 - Longitudinal or panel studies, cohort studies, interrupted time-series studies.
- **Exclusion criteria:** studies that are mixed method study design, qualitative, and cross-sectional in nature where temporality and directionality of association between the use of family planning and empowerment are not assured.
 - We examine relevant qualitative studies to help us explain the findings in our quantitative analysis (mechanisms, context, etc.)
- Peer-reviewed, full-text literature published between January 1, 2000, and January 31, 2022. Grey, hand review of reference lists and websites

When is empowerment empowerment?

Is a paper measuring empowerment if the authors have not conceptualized their outcome as empowerment?

- *Is measuring education alone a measure of empowerment if not framed as empowerment?*

In our systematic review, we limited our search to research outcomes conceptualized as empowerment:

Empowerment search terms:

"female agency" "autonomy" "female empowerment" "intrahousehold decision making" "women's decision-making" "women's decision-making power" "gender equality" "bargaining power" "household decision making" "women's decision-making" "gender norms" "freedom of movement" "women empowerment" "women's mobility" "women's empowerment" "women's status" "women's autonomy" "women's voice" "women's leadership" "women's agency" "gender attitudes" "women's economic empowerment" "financial autonomy" "women's time use"

Search results

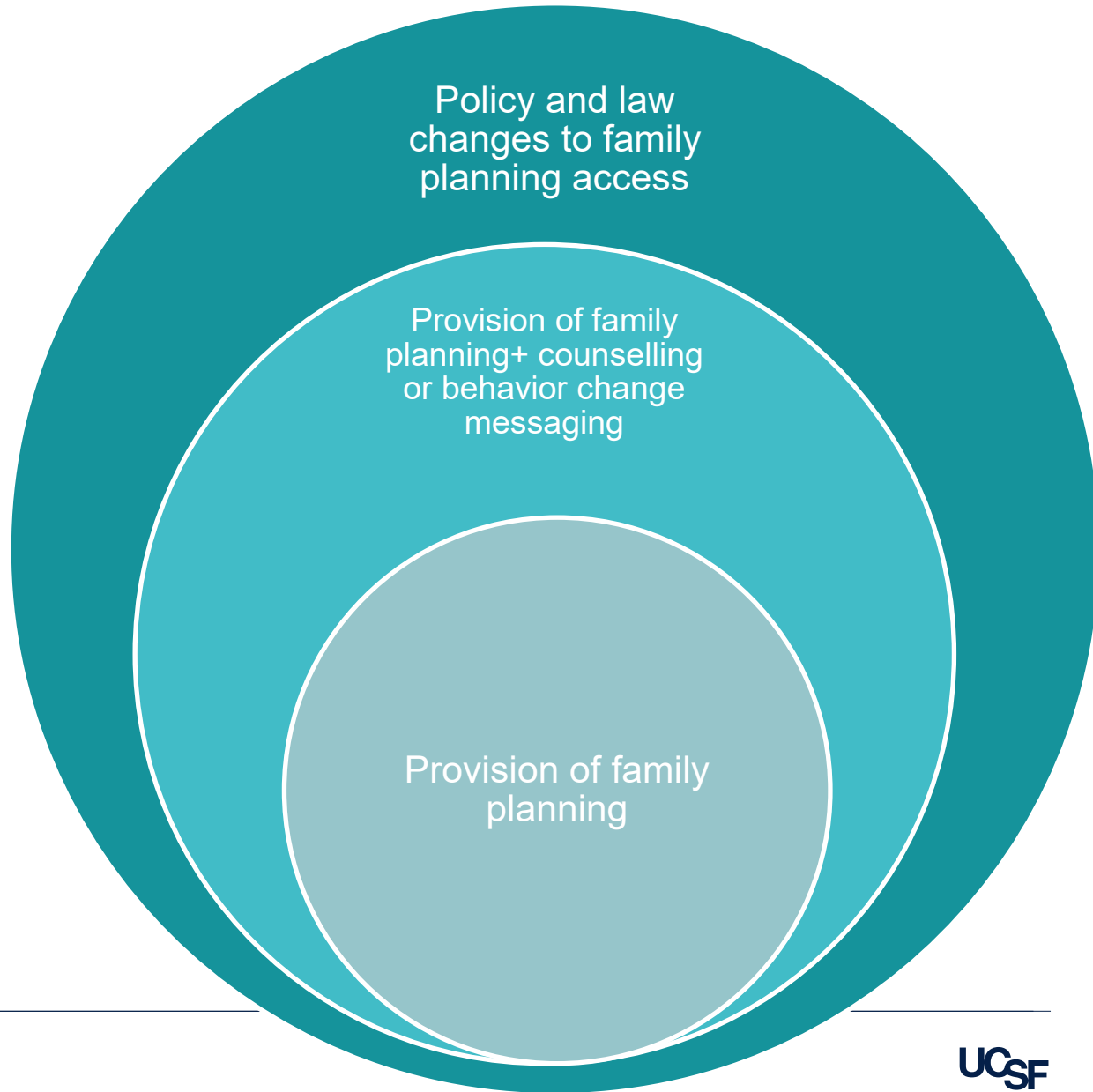
Number of titles/articles screened:

- Total articles after search: 11,141
- Articles screened: 3170 (after de-duplication)
- Articles for extraction (including grey literature and hand selected): 17
 - 14 quantitative
 - 3 qualitative



Diverse interventions

- 7 reported on family planning programs (mostly Matlab-Bangladesh)
- 4 on policies that provided more access to family planning,
- 2 on use of family planning
- 1 on an integrated intervention conducted via a randomized controlled trial



Empowerment outcomes found in our review by domain

Resources (n=8 papers)

- Most papers measured a resource outcome
- Economic resources were most commonly measured (e.g., labor force participation, wages)
- Education was the second most common
- Property rights and dowry were also included under resources

Agency (n=6 papers)

- Mostly decision-making or bargaining power (n=5)
- Also mobility, intimate partner violence, and marital dissolution were included under agency

Achievements (n=3 papers)

- These included subjective well-being and intergenerational impacts on next generation's achievement (e.g., child health)

Most (N=8) papers only measured across 1 domain of empowerment

7/5/2023								
Findings: Does family planning access increase empowerment?								
		Number of outcomes				Number of outcomes by domain of empowerment		
		Null	Positive	Negative	Total N	Null	Positive	Negative
Resources	Economic (labor/wages)	8	8	1	17	9 (41%)	10 (45%)	3 (14%)
	Education	1	2	0	3			
	Other	0	0	2	2			
Agency	Decision-making or bargaining power	0	3	2	5	2 (22%)	5 (56%)	2 (22%)
	Mobility, freedom of time	1	1	0	2			
	Gender norms	1	1	0	2			
Achievements	Well being	1	0	0	1	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	0 (0%)
	Next generation	2	2	0	4			

Thoughts for discussion:

Why are researchers measuring empowerment the way they are?

Empowerment is most often framed as economic empowerment/resources

- Why the over-reliance on resources/economic empowerment
 - Easier to measure?
 - Easier to conceptualize?
 - Better able to standardize across countries?
 - What type of researchers are studying “empowerment”?
 - Influence of economics at the basis of “empowerment”

Thoughts for discussion:

Why has empowerment been so narrowly defined?

Women's empowerment is a multi-dimensional construct - economic, socio-cultural, political, legal, and psychological empowerment.

- Most studies operationalized empowerment very narrowly
- Less than half of papers included multiple domains of empowerment (resources, agency, achievements)
- No papers operationalized empowerment as a process (as defined in Kabeer's framework)

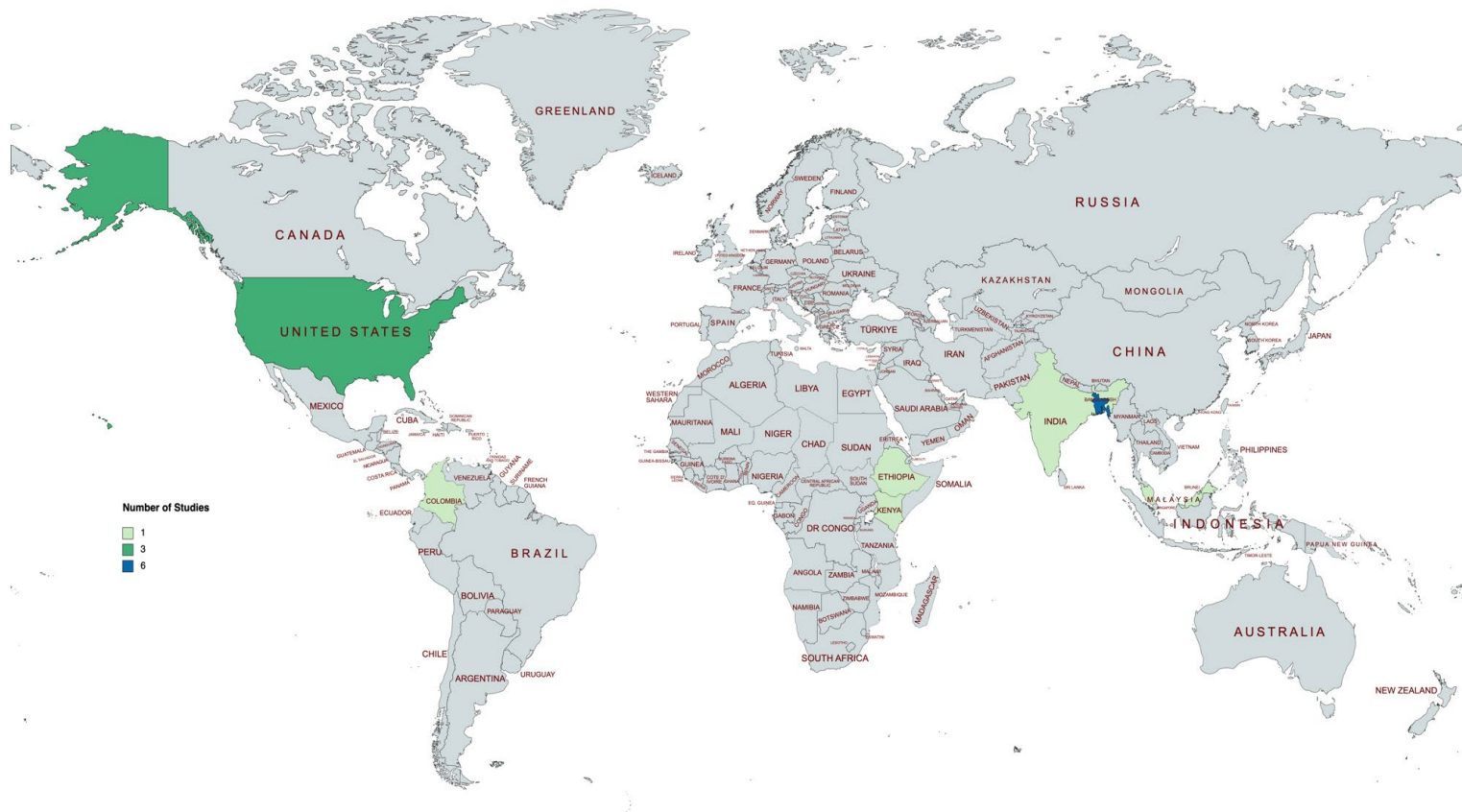
Empowerment in one dimension may not necessarily reflect empowerment in another.

- For example, women may have their own bank accounts but may not have freedom of movement to go outside. Would we still consider this as “empowerment”?

Thoughts for discussion:

Limited Geographies Included

- Most of our papers are from South Asia
- Many regions/areas unrepresented in our findings



Thoughts for discussion:

Does empowerment mean the same thing across countries, cultures? And how is it measured across settings?

Empowerment in one domain maybe more important in one setting compared to another depending on the cultural context and the nature of patriarchal norms that govern women.

- For instance, mobility is a big issue in South Asia but not so much in high-income countries or sub-Saharan Africa

We found geographic differences across empowerment indicators measured

- For example: Agency
 - Decision-making, mobility: more commonly measured in South Asia
 - IPV, partner dynamics and norms: more commonly measured in Africa

Thoughts for discussion:

Different theoretical underpinnings used, why?

- We limited our review to papers explicitly stating that they were studying women's empowerment
 - Could have missed some papers not grounded in an empowerment theory
- Despite this, the link between frameworks/theory and measures was not always clear
- Many different theories/frameworks used
 - Pulling from economics, rights, public health, feminism, etc.
- Makes comparisons of papers/outcomes difficult

Conclusions

Main takeaway: Evidence suggests that family planning is positively associated with a range of measures of women's empowerment.

- We are limited because of the small number of rigorous evaluations
- Need to think about publication bias

Few strong family planning interventions to really use—why?

- Timeframe of our review focused on recent studies, in an era where it was unethical to not provide people family planning, thus had to rely on natural experiments/policies/programs in many cases

Empowerment is a complex outcome, measured and conceptualized in different ways, and thus hard to come up with a strong overarching summary

Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

Future directions and considerations

Is there a need for **comprehensive validated measures** that captures:

1) all domains of empowerment (resources, agency, and achievements)

AND

3) the fact that **empowerment is a process** (need longitudinal data to study empowerment as a process)

What would this look like? Ideally:

- Theory-informed
- Validated across different regions (may need to accommodate regional variability)

Questions to consider:

- Is a standardized measure of empowerment possible for global use?
 - Some attempts have been made but not widely used (yet?)
 - Could the standardized measures be the same but interpreted differently across regions
 - Given differences, could we ever have a comparative assessment?

Evidence gap for the impact

First, do we need to provide evidence? Reproductive agency is a right

If we do feel we need to remedy this evidence gap, how could we?

1. A rigorous RCT of the effect of family planning on health and empowerment.

- Evaluate the impact of a community-based family planning outreach intervention
 - Follow women over time, and carefully measure a host of health and empowerment related outcomes. (temporality, causality, solid measures)
- Need to think carefully about the ethics of this
 - Focus on a group that does not have access/sufficient access to family planning
- To truly address reproductive agency and not only family planning access, any intervention should include (in addition to access to a range of methods)
 - Women-centered counselling about side effects, methods, engaging other decision-makers; addressing individual, household and community level norms; life skills in communication, negotiation (agency)

2. Model the impact of meeting family planning needs on women's empowerment

could pull from findings from a review like this or other existing evidence

Thank you for your time!

Questions?

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