

Women's Empowerment, Population Dynamics, and Socioeconomic Development

*Final Report of the
National Academies of Sciences,
Engineering, and Medicine
Committee on Women's Empowerment,
Population Dynamics, and
Socioeconomic Development*

COMMITTEE ON POPULATION

Statement of Task

An ad hoc committee of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine will undertake a study that will review and assess what is known about the impact of women's empowerment and associated population dynamics on global social and economic development. The study will develop a comprehensive conceptual framework, review the current state of knowledge, critically assess policy options, and set an agenda for future research and data collection; the study may provide recommendations related to these areas.

Committee on Women's Empowerment, Population Dynamics, and Socioeconomic Development

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Committee Approach

To address the charge, the committee:

- reviewed and synthesized research from a range of related fields
- held public information-gathering sessions to obtain additional input and to complement the committee's expertise
- received research assistance from consultants and fellows
- held closed-session meetings to deliberate on the information gathered and develop the report

Working Definitions

Empowerment is the expansion and safeguarding of an individual's or group's ability to make strategic life choices and to act on those choices to reach self-determined or collective goals.

Women's empowerment is the application of empowerment (as defined above) to women and girls specifically, recognizing that women's empowerment may occur in the context of restrictive gender norms and gender bias in structures and institutions that disadvantage cis-gender heterosexual women as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, and other (LGBTQI+) individuals, relative to cis-gender heterosexual men. Women's empowerment may be expressed or experienced differently across specific identities, for example based on race/ethnicity, caste, class, and religion.

Agency is an individual or collective's ability to act upon personal or shared aspirations toward the realization of self-determined or collectively determined goals. Agency is the component of empowerment that connects enabling resources and aspirations to achievements. It operates at multiple levels: individual, interpersonal, community, and societal.

Working Definitions (cont.)

Population dynamics include the growth, composition, and distribution of the population, and the contributing roles of fertility, mortality, and migration, either globally or in given geographic areas. Analyses of population dynamics are typically quantitative and consider factors affecting fertility, mortality, and migration from the individual to the population level.

Socioeconomic development is the process and achievement of social and economic advancement at the individual, household, community, and societal levels. This process includes improvements in standards of living, education, health, civil engagement, and state capacity.

Report Organization

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Chapter 2 - Review of Women's Empowerment Frameworks and Measures

Chapter 3 - A New Conceptual Framework to Understand Women's Empowerment, Population Dynamics, and Socioeconomic Development

Chapter 4 - Women's Empowerment and Population Dynamics

Chapter 5 - Women's Empowerment and Women's and Children's Health

Chapter 6 - Women's Empowerment and Socioeconomic Development

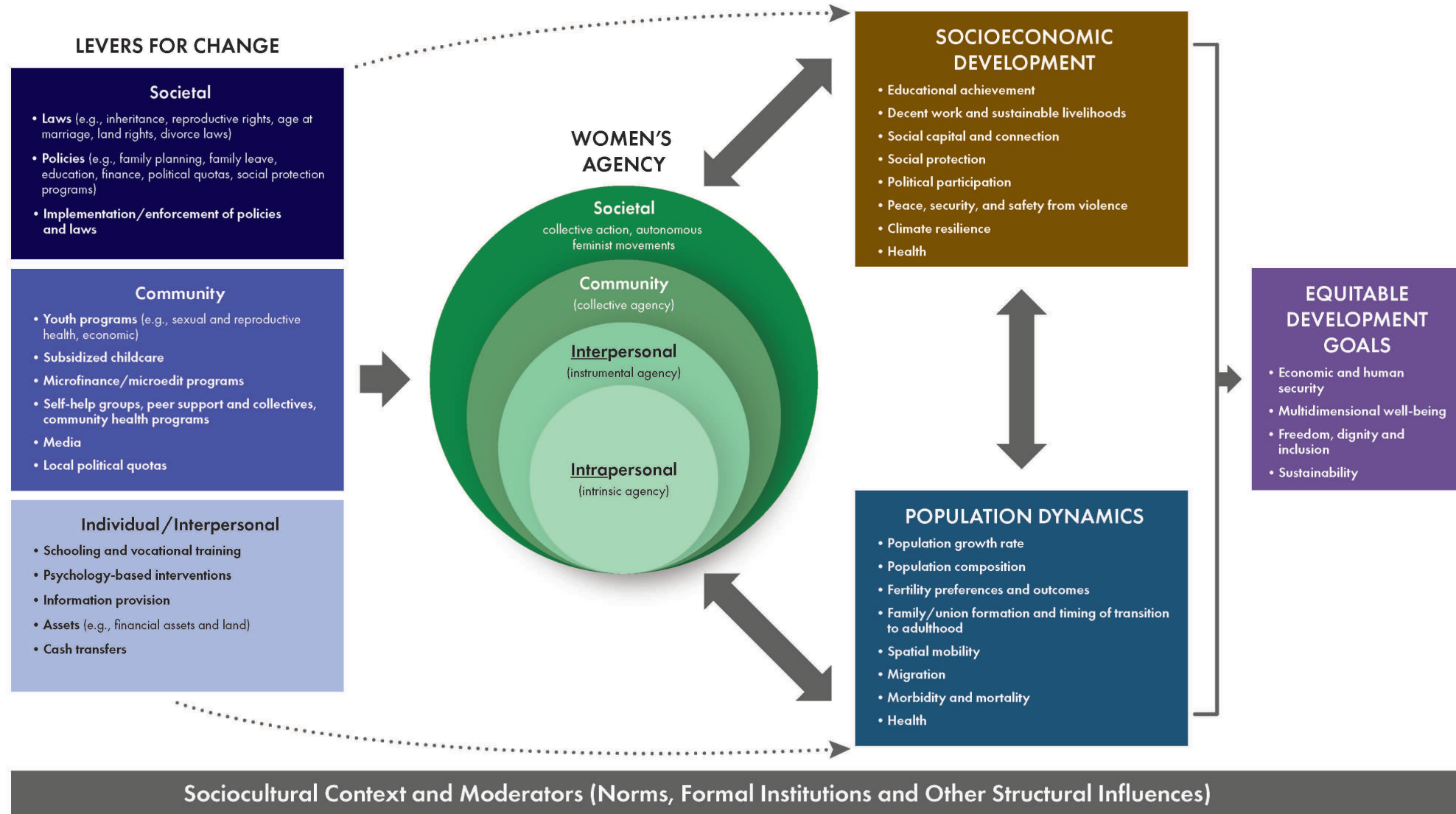
Chapter 7 - Levers for Change: Evidence on Effective Programs and Policies to Increase Women's Agency in the Empowerment Process

Chapter 8 - Conclusions and Recommendations

Frameworks of Women's Empowerment

- Process for reviewing existing frameworks of women's empowerment
- Major similarities and differences in frameworks identified in the review
- Limitations of existing frameworks the committee aimed to address

New Conceptual Framework



Women's Empowerment and Population Dynamics

- Causal evidence related to the roles of family formation and fertility, cash transfers, skills training, employment, and education subsidies in shaping population dynamics
- Studies imply that impacts on family and fertility outcomes flow through women's agency, but findings inconsistent across studies and geographies due to:
 - differences in terminology and measurement of women's empowerment
 - paucity of research on the agency-related mechanisms
 - limited longitudinal data

Women's Empowerment and Population Dynamics (cont.)

- Research in this area:
 - is focused on women's individual and interpersonal empowerment, with limited attention to higher levels of women's empowerment (e.g., collective resources and agency)
 - lacks attention to the broader gender and policy context (e.g. formal institutions and norms)
 - often involves interventions confined to single, small-scale geographies and to relatively homogenous cultural contexts

Women's Empowerment and Women's and Children's Health

- Substantial body of work focuses on the relationships between women's empowerment and healthcare access, utilization, and outcomes
- Areas that have causal evidence include: interventions and programs designed to improve sexual and reproductive health access, family planning use, antenatal health, and infant to young child health outcomes

Women's Empowerment and Women's and Children's Health (cont.)

- Literature relies primarily on cross-sectional data, with fewer studies that can illuminate causal relationships
- Studies tend to use unidimensional or narrowly defined indicators, with an absence of multidimensional measures of both empowerment and outcomes
- Lack of studies focused on a holistic set of physical, mental, reproductive, and behavioral health conditions, across the life course

Women's Empowerment and Socioeconomic Development

- Macroeconomic models suggest nuanced effects of women's empowerment on economic dynamics
- Laws that strengthen women's representation or rights have been shown to improve outcomes
 - outcomes include healthcare spending, girls' educational attainment and women's labor force participation
- Studies document how women's access to resources, including assets and income, positively impacts socioeconomic development
- Evidence base isolating the role of women's agency on socioeconomic development outcomes is thinner
 - impacts are presumed to result from women's differential preferences, but preferences are seldom measured directly

Women's Empowerment and Socioeconomic Development (cont.)

- Individual agency:
 - self-efficacy is the most directly measured dimension with the greatest empirical evidence
 - less empirical evidence exists for direct measures of women's awareness of their rights, locus of control, goalsetting, internal motivation, and the actions women may take without others' knowledge
- Interpersonal agency:
 - decision-making ability is the most measured construct
 - the specific domain of decision making is not always measured
- Community-level and societal-level agency:
 - causal evidence is limited on how changes in women's agency at these levels affect socioeconomic development

Levers for Change: Policies and Programs that Increase Agency

Interventions were found to influence women's aspirations, self-efficacy, and decision making in the areas of:

- financial programs (e.g., cash transfers, microfinance, and job training and placement)
- women's collectives to support women's economic and health status and build collective efficacy
- health interventions (e.g., family planning and sexual and reproductive health programs, community health worker programs for maternal and child health, peer programs for mental health)
- youth development interventions (e.g., programs focused on early marriage prevention and education promotion; life skills training)
- social and legal protections and policies (e.g., gender-equal opportunity, safety from gender-based violence)

Levers for Change: Policies and Programs that Increase Agency (cont.)

Limitations:

- Existing evidence cannot be generalized beyond homogeneous study populations and geographically narrow contexts
- Insufficient evidence on policies in the areas of marriage, divorce and custody laws, wage equality laws, and family leave policies
- Insufficient evidence from low- and middle-income countries on the role of agency at the community and societal levels
- Evidence on collective agency and collective action as outcomes is limited
- Evidence on the impact of women's social movements on agency at the individual and interpersonal levels is limited

Recommendations

The report makes recommendations in three broad areas:

- 1) Improving Measurement
- 2) Enhancing Study Designs
- 3) Collaboration and Harmonization

Improving Measurement

RECOMMENDATION 1: Data collection on women's empowerment should be expanded to include the range of measures necessary to fully capture elements of women's empowerment, as well as the dynamics and pathways in the committee's framework that remain poorly understood. Many of these aspects are multidimensional and should be understood as such. These include:

- Sociocultural norms and structures as conditioning factors in the sociocontextual environment.
- Structural dynamics and sexism.
- The role of men, including structural gender inequalities, inequitable gender norms, and masculine dominance.
- Barriers to empowerment.
- Effective methods to reduce gender inequality in productivity, earnings, and profits.
- Effective methods to address norms surrounding women's domestic work.
- Effective methods to eliminate occupational segregation.
- Effective methods to build resilience for women in the face of climate change and other shocks.
- Women's access to health programs (e.g., social protection, insurance, contraception, prenatal and childbirth care, infant and child healthcare, women's healthcare).
- Girls' and women's education and skill building.
- Girls' and women's social networks and supports.
- Couple dynamics.
- Perceptions of rights.
- Time allocation and control over time.

Improving Measurement

RECOMMENDATION 2: Researchers and government data-collection entities studying women's empowerment should identify opportunities to collect longitudinal data from large-scale studies to better understand change over time, including the determinants of sustained gains in women's empowerment and the long-term effects of women's empowerment on socioeconomic development.

Improving Measurement

RECOMMENDATION 3: Research should prioritize the development of direct multidimensional, construct-specific, and multilevel measures of agency. To the extent that proxy measures are used, researchers should strive for consistency and clarity on how such measures are defined and used, and should be clear that the role of women's agency is assumed and not directly measured. Particular attention should be paid to defining, operationalizing, and assessing the reliability and validity of the following dimensions of women's agency in diverse contexts, leveraging the newest research:

- Individual awareness of rights, aspirations and preferences, goal setting and choice, internal motivation.
- Control and decision making, including economic and reproductive decision making, at the individual and interpersonal levels.
- Collective agency in formal groups and informal networks at the community and societal levels (e.g., shared goals, collective efficacy, collective action toward shared goals).

Improving Measurement

RECOMMENDATION 4: Research on agency should include studies of women's agency across the entire life course and at key life stages and milestones, with consideration of the socioecological and cultural context and intergenerational influences on key life stages, milestones, and inflection points.

Enhancing Study Designs

RECOMMENDATION 5: Research on women's empowerment and agency should prioritize study designs that:

- Test causal relationships between dimensions of women's empowerment and population dynamics and socioeconomic development, and that better elucidate the role of relevant concepts as causal factors or outcomes. These designs include randomized controlled trials, quasi-experiments, natural experiments, and longitudinal designs to establish causality; to examine reciprocal, temporal relationships; and to distinguish effects related to the mode of intervention delivery and quality of implementation from the content of the intervention.
- Include qualitative data collection to contextualize theories of change, to inform intervention and research design, and to aid in the interpretation of findings that offer causal evidence.
- Are informed by the perspectives of the women and communities being studied.
- Examine multiple intervention points along the theoretical pathways of interest.
- Provide understanding of life-course trajectories and inflection points.

Enhancing Study Designs

RECOMMENDATION 6: Research funders should support studies designed to examine the effects of programs and policies intended to enhance women's empowerment and, thereby, socioeconomic development. Study designs should include sufficient follow-up time to examine sustainability of impacts, as well as measures that permit assessment of unintended adverse effects of interventions, including outcomes (both intended and unintended) that may not be immediate.

Enhancing Study Designs

RECOMMENDATION 7: To establish external validity, more attention should be devoted to understanding the role of interventions and the specific role of women's agency as a mechanism for social change—at the institutional and societal levels, as well as across diverse cultural settings. Also, more attention should be paid to understanding the feasibility, acceptability, and sustainability of, as well as engagement with, these interventions.

Enhancing Study Designs

RECOMMENDATION 8: Studies are needed to better understand the impacts of integrated approaches to women's empowerment (e.g., cash transfers to women alongside efforts to address restrictive social and gender norms) and integrated women's healthcare (e.g., service-delivery models that can address women's sexual and reproductive health as well as psychosocial care needs).

Enhancing Study Designs

RECOMMENDATION 9: Research funders should support cost analyses and implementation science studies to provide guidance on scaling up efficacious interventions. Such efforts should include systematic tracking of program-implementation data. As evidence from experimental studies continues to grow, comparative effectiveness studies may provide best-practice guidance to government officials and civil society organizations regarding the most cost-effective empowerment approaches in specific country contexts.

Collaboration and Harmonization

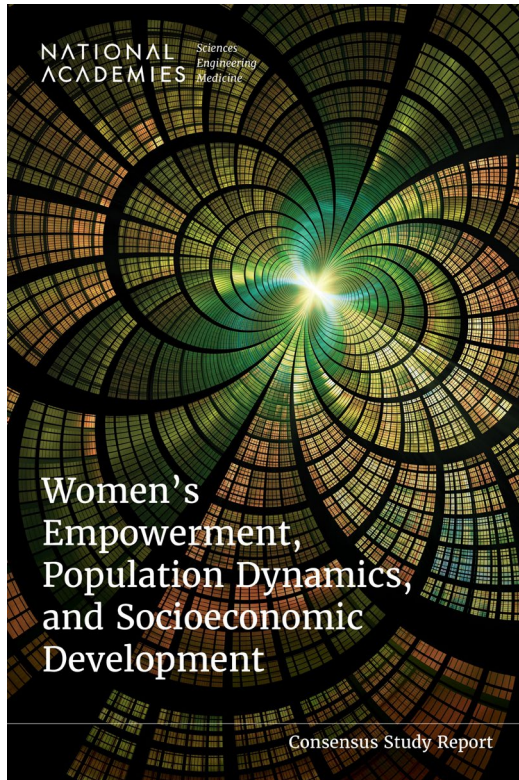
RECOMMENDATION 10: Research funders should establish an international, multidisciplinary group to increase coordination and priority setting for the work in this area. The advisory group could include representatives of funding organizations and other experts and stakeholders, and it would be charged with:

- Developing and publishing standards and best practices for development and validation of measures for empowerment, so researchers and implementers can better distinguish among the array of measures in use.
- Coordinating work on psychometric assessment of measures of empowerment and related concepts, and evaluating the possibility of (and recommended processes for) harmonizing measures and global indicators of women's agency and empowerment that would be suitable for comparative use cross-culturally and with various populations.
- Identifying questions and measures that improve measurement of specific empowerment constructs in specific cultures and languages.
- Setting priorities for development of experimental studies to generate causal evidence on relationships that currently are not well understood.

Collaboration and Harmonization

RECOMMENDATION 11: Government, program, and researcher data collections should be better coordinated and aligned. The international group named in Recommendation 10 could facilitate efforts to enhance coordination and alignment across these groups.

Report Resources



Report download

<https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/27955>

Summary highlights

https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/27955/HLs_Womens_Empowerment.pdf

Interactive report overview

<https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/27955/interactive/>

Q&A

VIRTUAL PARTICIPANTS

**PLEASE USE THE CHAT BOX BELOW TO ASK QUESTIONS OR
PROVIDE FEEDBACK**

