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What Dimensions of Women’s Empowerment Matter for Nutritional Outcomes? Evidence from Africa and Asia

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Abstract

Although linkages between increasing resources controlled by women and nutrition are well established, the linkages between women’s empowerment and nutrition have been more difficult to quantify owing to the difficulty of measuring empowerment. This paper conducts new empirical analysis using the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), based on large scale surveys in six countries in Africa and Asia, to identify which dimensions and indicators of women’s empowerment matter for different diet and nutrition outcomes. We use data from Feed the Future population-based surveys from Bangladesh, Nepal, Cambodia, Ghana, Mozambique, and Tanzania and model the relationship between nutritional outcomes at the household and individual level and women’s empowerment in agriculture. Household-level outcomes include the household hunger score, household dietary diversity, and household calorie availability. Women’s outcomes include dietary diversity and body mass index (BMI), while child outcomes include indicators of infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices, dietary diversity, and anthropometric measures.

We find that higher women’s empowerment scores and greater household equality (a smaller gap between men’s and women’s empowerment scores) are almost always associated with better nutritional outcomes. Across countries, higher women’s empowerment is also associated with children’s nutritional outcomes. Cultural preference for boys over girls is evident in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Ghana; increased women’s empowerment is often associated with worse girls’ anthropometric outcomes relative to boys. Improved nutrition is not necessarily correlated with being empowered across all empowerment domains, indicating the possibility of tradeoffs. In Nepal, control over incomes is associated with higher women’s BMI, but if intensifying participation in agriculture increases workload, then both maternal and child nutrition could be at risk.

The WEAI can be used to identify policy and programming priorities by disaggregating the contribution of each indicator to women’s disempowerment. Whenever addressing a top contributor to disempowerment is strongly associated with improvement in several nutritional outcomes, interventions targeting these top contributors to disempowerment could potentially be very cost-effective.

Keywords: Dietary diversity, infant and young child feeding, maternal and child nutrition, time use, women’s empowerment in agriculture