



## **Measuring women's empowerment: a need for context and caution**

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## Measuring women's empowerment: a need for context and caution

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5) urges governments to monitor progress towards gender equality and empowering women and girls. Improved measurement is needed to meet this mandate, which requires that women's empowerment be well defined, adequately measured by use of representative and focused samples, and statistically comparable across countries, years, and social groups. Accordingly, it is unclear whether the survey-based women's empowerment (SWPER) index, reported in *The Lancet Global Health* by Fernanda Ewerling and colleagues (September, 2017),<sup>1</sup> improves measurement of SDG5.

First, Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data drive Ewerling and colleagues' choice of items (indicators). Consequently, the SWPER does not clearly reflect the authors' initial holistic definition of empowerment, entailing the capacity to make purposive choices, the ability to consider oneself able and entitled to make decisions, and the ability to have a critical consciousness of women's rights and of gendered power relations. Some SWPER items measure health outcomes themselves, instead of the preconditions for empowerment, because the index omits important components of empowerment, including choice and agency around political and economic participation or leadership. Moreover, the DHS typically excludes many vulnerable groups, and SWPER is validated only for partnered women of reproductive ages. Ewerling and colleagues state that there is a need for a cross-cultural standard indicator to guarantee that the most vulnerable groups are not left behind, and this point still needs to be addressed. On these grounds, the SWPER does not clearly advance current best practices.<sup>2-5</sup>

Second, Ewerling and colleagues claim that SWPER enables within-country and between-country comparisons, as well as analysis of time trends. They imply that their assessment of comparability was based mostly on subjective assessment of cross-country similarities in pattern loadings. Ewerling and colleagues neither report comparisons across social groups or survey years within countries, nor present rigorous evidence for measurement invariance—ie, a well-fitting confirmatory factor structure, or a model fit that permits assessment across countries, social groups,<sup>4</sup> and over time.<sup>5</sup> Ewerling and colleagues also present some items with low loadings across all domains of empowerment, suggesting poor fit (including those for age, education difference of spouses, and employment status in the previous 12 months), suggesting that they do not contribute substantially to any domain of empowerment. Finally, the authors do not provide Cronbach's  $\alpha$  statistics for individual components. A full psychometric assessment still seems to be needed to permit the meaningful within-country, across-country, and longitudinal comparisons that the authors claim SWPER allows.<sup>4,5</sup>

We thank Ewerling and colleagues for proposing a method to monitor SDG5. However, we caution against using the SWPER before further rigorous validation, including a measurement invariance assessment and reliability tests. We urge researchers to seize this moment to refine concepts, to measure them adequately by use of representative and focused samples, and rigorously assess comparability, so governments have state-of-the-art methods and data to monitor SDG5.

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