

# Women, food, and power:

## An examination of women's agricultural production, self-determination, and attitudes toward women in rural Nepal

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### Background

Smallholder agriculture as it is traditionally practiced around the world is not a path to escaping poverty. International development agencies have demonstrated that horticultural research is an economically productive area for intervention, however, and global development strategy has consequently begun to focus in recent years on helping smallholders to shift into production of high-value, nutrient-dense horticulture (DFID, 2005; Bowman, 2012). Due to the very high rate of women's participation in horticulture, empowering rural women is believed to be an especially critical element of any strategy to increase productivity, achieve food security, and reduce hunger (FAO, 2011; World Bank, 2011; Bowman, 2012).



In Nepal, more than two-thirds of the population is engaged in farming small plots of land, growing low-yield staple grains that are generally insufficient to meet basic family caloric needs (Samriddhi, 2011). These farm systems in Nepal increasingly rely on women, as rates of international migration among men are rising. This feminization of agriculture has opened new opportunities for empowering women and improving local and regional food security, while simultaneously creating new risks of further marginalization (Tamang et al., 2014).

#### Women’s empowerment

The literature on women's empowerment is extensive and reflects evolving interpretations of its multiple dimensions. Kabeer (1999) describes one commonly recognized understanding of empowerment, rooted in a woman's ability to make choices. Any choice has both inputs and outcomes (which reflect access to resources and achievements in well-being); between them lies the critical process of choosing, which depends on the concept of agency. Amartya Sen (1989) describes this as the ability of a person to act on behalf of what he or she values. women farmers

While agency is only one piece of the empowerment puzzle, it is a crucial one and is the primary basis for the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), developed in 2011 by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Institute (OPHI) as a multidimensional instrument to measure individual empowerment (Alkire et al., 2013). This study specifically explores this link between agency in agricultural production and the values that may inform it.

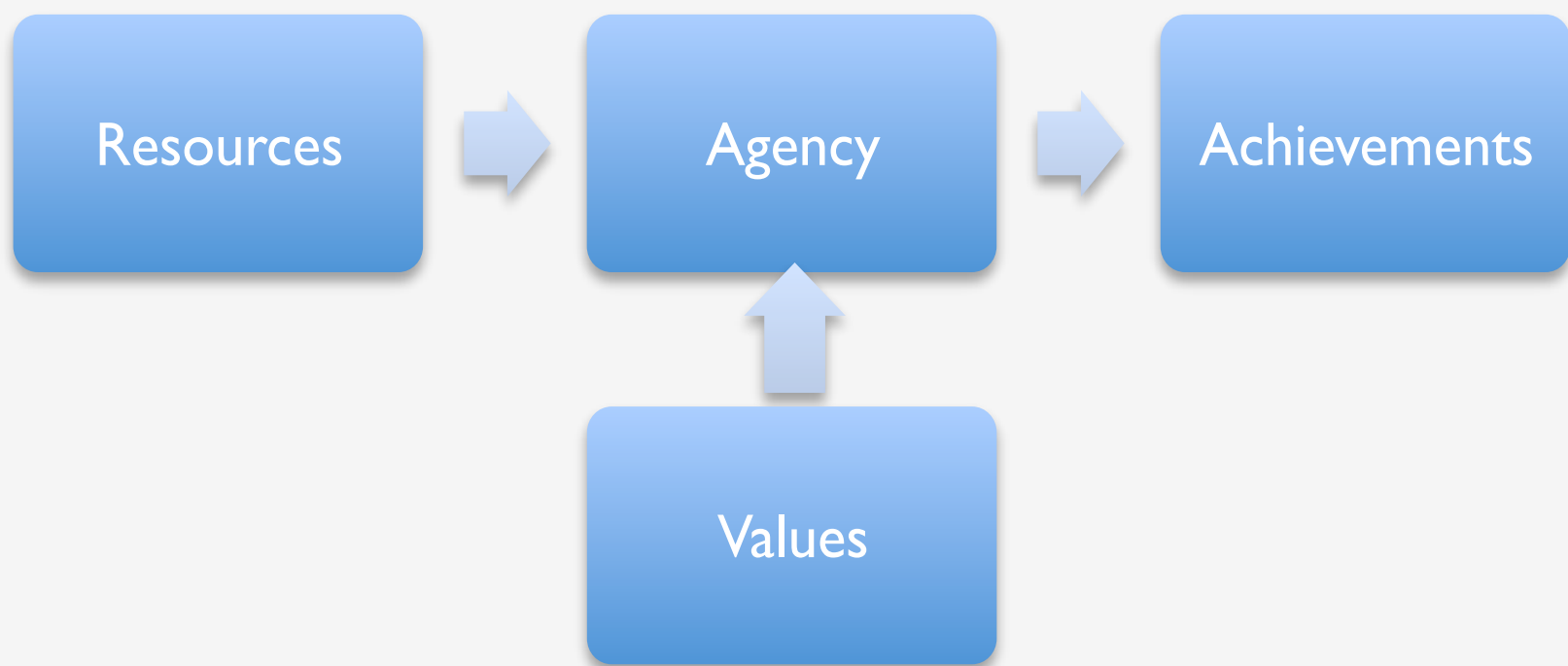


Figure 1 “Empowerment” represented as ability to choose, from Kabeer (1999) and Sen (1989)

### Research Aim

To explore the association between two elements of empowerment—agency in production and attitudes toward women's rights and societal roles—to better understand how expression of cultural values may be related to women's participation in horticultural production.

#### Hypotheses

- Horticultural production is associated with stronger levels of self-determination in production among women.
- Positive attitudes toward women's rights and societal roles is associated with greater self-determination in horticultural production.

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### Methods

This is a descriptive, cross-sectional study, using secondary data gathered by iDE Nepal in early 2014 during a baseline survey, prior to beginning interventions in the Far-West region of Nepal. The survey was clustered at the village level and included household-level indicators reflecting social, economic, and farm-related data as well as individual-level indicators for each member of the household. Data on gender empowerment was also gathered for 200 households using a modified Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) instrument, for which one woman and one man in each household was interviewed.

The WEAI assesses production, resources, income, leadership, and time as domains of empowerment. This study specifically looks at the production domain. The following questions were asked about production of cereal crops for home consumption and production of horticultural crops for sale:

- Have you personally been engaged in the following work in the past 12 months?
- In your household, who is the primary person who makes decisions about this activity?
- In your household, who is the primary person who makes decisions about income from this activity?

Any response reflecting decision-making power in these areas (*always me, usually me, sometimes me and sometimes my spouse, me and my spouse together*) was counted as indicating agency.

Appended to this WEAI instrument was a module asking respondents to rank whether or not they agreed with specific, strong statements about women's rights and societal roles, according to a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (5):

- A woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together
- There are times when women deserve to be beaten
- A woman should obey her husband in all things
- Women should leave politics to men
- Women should be limited to do household chores such as cleaning and cooking; this is their job
- Education is not valuable for daughters/daughters-in-law

These six responses were compiled and standardized to form a five-point scale, with 5 representing the highest possible value (total self-determination) in all areas. Because this survey was designed to set a baseline for women's empowerment interventions, the index intentionally assigns normative judgment. It assumes that there is value in women avoiding violence, corporal punishment, and blind obedience, and in having access to political discourse, productive work, and education.

### Results and Discussion

#### Production and agency

In all cases, agency in production was lower among women than among men, which was not unexpected. There were slightly lower rates of self-reported agency among women who grew horticulture for sale, however, than among those growing cereals for home consumption. This stands contrary to popular wisdom in Nepal, which holds that women tend to have more say over vegetable production than other crops.

The distinction in this case may be due to the WEAI survey language, which specifies cereal crops *for home consumption* and horticultural crops *for sale*. In rural Nepal, it is common for smallholders to sell parts of each crop, so both economic categories might reasonably apply to both sets of crops. It is possible that by emphasizing the distinction between the two, the survey instrument biased the responses. It is also common in many parts of Nepal for women to assume specific responsibilities for grain crops (transplanting rice, for example), and it is possible that autonomy over specific tasks may give them greater feeling of agency over production and income.

	Women	Men
Growing cereals for home consumption	96.0%	83.4%
Making decisions about cereals	63.0	74.1
Making decisions about income from cereals	47.4	66.9
Growing horticultural cash crops	77.0	69.5
Making decisions about cash crops	56.5	73.4
Making decisions about income from cash crops	44.8	68.3

#### Attitudes toward women

Attitudes about women's rights and societal roles showed significantly different responses between men and women on the compiled scale, with women on average expressing more positive attitudes. In addition, statements about general violence and corporal punishment were significantly different between the sexes, with men on average expressing negative attitudes (sympathizing, e.g., with the sentiment that “there are times when women deserve to be beaten”).

	Men		Women	
	n	mean (sd)	n	mean (sd)
Violence	180	3.29 (1.27)	199	3.62 (1.20)
Punishment	180	3.20 (1.10)	199	3.55 (1.07)
Obedience	179	3.05 (1.06)	198	3.09 (1.02)
Politics	180	3.88 (1.14)	199	3.85 (1.10)
Chores/work	180	3.24 (1.16)	199	3.38 (1.24)
Education	180	3.88 (1.38)	199	3.92 (1.49)
Attitudes index	180	3.05 (.65)	199	3.24 (.62)

### Results and Discussion, continued

While this divide between the sexes is notable, it may be more revealing that the sexes were roughly in agreement on all the other attitudes expressed. On average, both sexes agreed most strongly with the statement that a woman should obey her husband in all things and least strongly with the sentiment that education is not valuable for daughters.

Comparing the average attitudes index score between men and women with different levels of agency in horticultural production reveals an interesting discrepancy. In all cases but one, there was no significant difference between those who had decision-making power over production or income. The exception is among men, and the significance and magnitude of difference suggests that it is not likely due to chance: among men who are involved in horticultural production, those who make decisions about production have significantly more positive attitudes toward women.

		Agency (making decisions)		No Agency (not making decisions)	
		n	mean (sd)	n	mean (sd)
Decisions about production	Men	101	3.35 (.65)	31	2.95 (.54)
	Women	87	3.23 (.57)	67	3.31 (.54)
Decisions about income	Men	93	3.03 (.54)	39	3.08 (.72)
	Women	68	3.28 (.62)	86	3.26 (.51)

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### Summary of Conclusions

Agriculture, especially horticulture, is an economically productive mechanism for rural development. Given the high level of women's participation in horticulture, this is seen to be an important mechanism to empower women and is an essential part of current international development strategy.

The evidence here does not, however, bear out the simplistic idea that horticultural production *per se* is associated with higher levels of agency in production, nor is agency associated naturally with positive attitudes/values among women. Instead, only among men do we see an important distinction between the attitudes of those who have agency and those who do not. The small data set and limited analysis here make it inadvisable to draw strong conclusions, though the results do raise questions worthy of further study. Are men who have more positive attitudes about women more likely to participate actively in what is often considered a traditionally female profession? Or is it possible that men who have greater agency in horticulture production actually improve their views of women?

The concept of empowerment is difficult to define in part due to the subjectivity of its underlying values, which are themselves determined by personal experience and cultural context. In this study, for the sake of convenience and given the scope of the data collection, the survey assigned value to specific pre-determined (“outsider”) attitudes; qualitative research in the communities under study might uncover a different set of high-priority values, however, and these might shed greater light on the relationship between agency and production. Subsequent analysis might take into account data reflecting other domains of empowerment as assessed with the WEAI instrument. It would also be useful to assess the validity of this “attitudes index” against known determinants of empowerment in these communities.

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