

DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF A WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN MIGRATION INDEX (WEMI)

A Pilot Application with Women Migrants in Bangladesh

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WHY A FOCUS ON WOMEN'S MIGRATION?

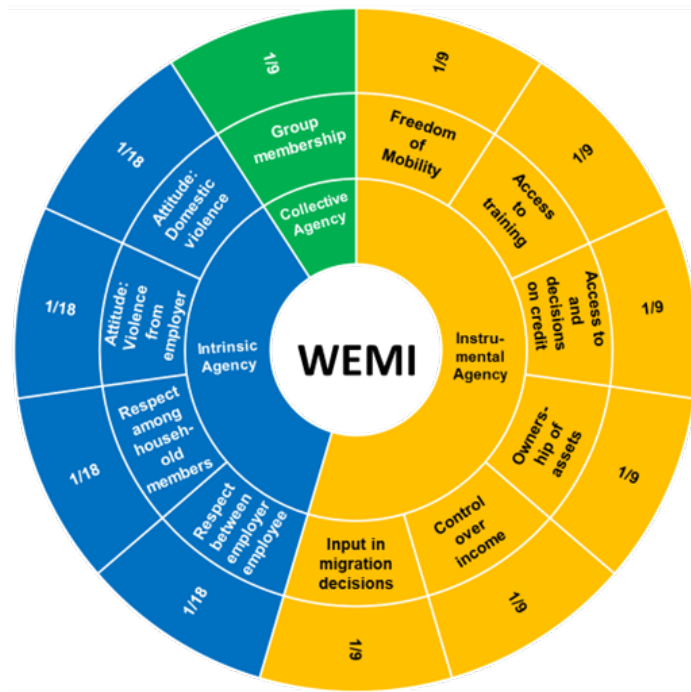
There is ample data and literature that shows how women's experiences in low-paid, short-term migration vary from those of men, and that experiences are linked to women's empowerment – captured by the interrelated dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements. While considerable attention is paid to understanding the generalized notion of women's empowerment, it is also key to distinguish empowerment in specific realms, including economic empowerment, agriculture, health and nutrition, and migration. To better understand the agency of female migrants, we developed a Women's Empowerment in Migration Index (WEMI) and we assess the index with data from women migrants in the Bangladesh to West Asia migration corridor. WEMI advances research over earlier assessments of women's experiences in the migration process. It takes the research beyond more seemingly objective indicators such as income and health to incorporate elements of subjective wellbeing and decision-making from migration literature.

THE INDEX

WEMI is constructed using observational data collected from migration-prone districts in Bangladesh between May to June 2022, under the "Gender-Sensitive Risks and Options Assessment for Decision Making (ROAD)" project. The survey was part of a larger evaluation program to assess the impact of the Work in Freedom-Phase-2, a program implemented by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Bangladesh. Data on 1019 women returnee migrants was used for the analysis.

Questions in the pilot WEMI survey were framed to capture retrospective responses on access to resources, perceived agency, and decision-making capabilities of returnee migrants, before and during their last migration. Although this allows room for potential recall bias, the alternative approach of surveying migrants in destination countries had seemingly larger challenges. This is because respondents who would be available for such a detailed survey at destination countries are likely to be systematically different (and possibly more empowered) than the wider vulnerable population of female migrants.

Figure 1: WEMI Components



Source: Authors.

WEMI draws on the Pro-WEAI methodology, developed by IFPRI's [Gender, Agriculture, and Assets Project, Phase 2](#) (GAAP2) and the [Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative](#) (OPHI) to evaluate empowerment of migrant women across three key domains of agency: (1) Intrinsic agency (power within), (2) Instrumental agency (power to), and (3) Collective agency (power with). Although the domains of empowerment reflect those of Pro-WEAI, the final indicators under each domain of WEMI have been tailored to reflect activities and decisions related to migration. Figure 1 presents the domains and indicators of WEMI with assigned indicator weights for the construction of the final index.

Intrinsic agency in WEMI includes two indicators reflecting the respondent's attitudes towards violence—from the husband and the employer—as well as two indicators assessing respect between the migrant woman and her husband, and her employer/supervisor, respectively. Instrumental agency (power to) is composed of six indicators, namely, input in the decision to migrate, ownership of land and other assets, access to and decisions on financial services/credit, control over use of income and remittances, freedom of mobility in the destination country and access to migration-relevant training. Finally, active participation in a group before or during migration (group membership) reflects the collective agency (power with) of a migrant woman.

A weighted sum of all indicator variables is computed to generate the individual empowerment scores of the respondents, which can range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more empowerment. We used sensitivity analysis and other tests to arrive at an empowerment cut-off point of 0.75, such that a migrant is classified as empowered if her weighted empowerment score is equal to or above 0.75. The individual scores of empowerment are then aggregated to construct the Three Domains of Empowerment (3DE) score, which considers both the number of women who are disempowered and the intensity of their disempowerment.

RESULTS

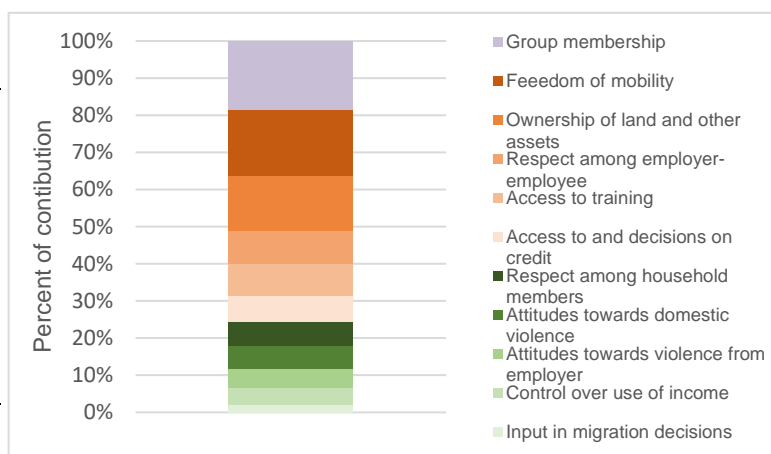
Table 1 summarizes the key, high-level results of our survey. The aggregate WEMI score for migrant women is 0.60, with only 14% achieving a score higher than the 0.75 cut off. Among the women who were classified as disempowered, the average adequacy score was 0.53.

Nearly 80% of the migrant women in our sample worked in the domestic care sector, with 90% of these migrants residing in the home of their employer, while 13% of the migrants worked as garment factory workers in the destination country. Comparing the empowerment results of women in different professions in the destination country, we find that 32% of the garment factory workers achieved empowerment compared to only 17% and 10% of the women who worked as live-out and live-in caretakers respectively.

Table 1 Summary of WEMI Results
disempowerment

Indicator	Women
Number of observations	1018
3DE score	0.60
Disempowerment score (1 – 3DE)	0.40
% Achieving empowerment	0.14
% Not achieving empowerment	0.86
Mean 3DE score for not yet empowered	0.53
Mean disempowerment score (1 – 3DE)	0.47
WEMI score (3DE Score)	0.60

Figure 2 Percent of contribution of indicator to total



Source: Authors.

The breakdown of the WEMI into its domains and sub-domains of disempowerment allows diagnosis of the key sources of disempowerment of returnee migrants (Figure 2). The largest sources are lack of group membership (18.6%), restricted mobility in the destination country (17.8%) and lack of asset ownership (14.7%).

Finally, we test for associations between the WEMI and other measures of wellbeing to test how well the index correlates with, and is predictive of, contemporaneous measures of subjective expectations and wellbeing. Individual WEMI scores are observed to be significantly correlated with measures of the migrants' current mental health, perceived risks of migration, livelihood efficacy and overall life-satisfaction.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The WEMI can be an important tool to measure impacts of interventions designed to reduce women's vulnerability to trafficking and forced labor in migration and provides insights into the domains that contribute to gaps in agency and access to resources that impede safe migration, and empowerment of women migrants. Although the current design can serve as an efficient policy tool, there is further scope of development and validation of the index.

To begin with, incorporating work-life balance as an indicator of women's agency in the migration process remains unexplored and a valuable potential addition to the existing tool. Because all questions in the WEMI survey have been

designed for retrospective responses from returnee migrants, WEMI did not include time-use for various activities including productive activities, leisure, and self-care in the destination country. Aspects of social capital beyond group membership should also be explored, given challenges for women migrants to participate in formal groups in destination countries, and the critical importance of informal, often one-to-one, access to fellow-migrants and community members as a source of both information, and solidarity, for women migrants.

Furthermore, we recommend validating WEMI in additional countries beyond the Bangladesh-West Asia corridor. This will be important to assess validity in other migration contexts. Finally, future work testing the validity of WEMI for domestic migration of women within a country, is also interesting and imperative in furthering the research on women's agency in their migration process, in both local and international contexts.

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