

SPREAD 1

Women's pathways to empowerment: Do all roads lead to Rome?

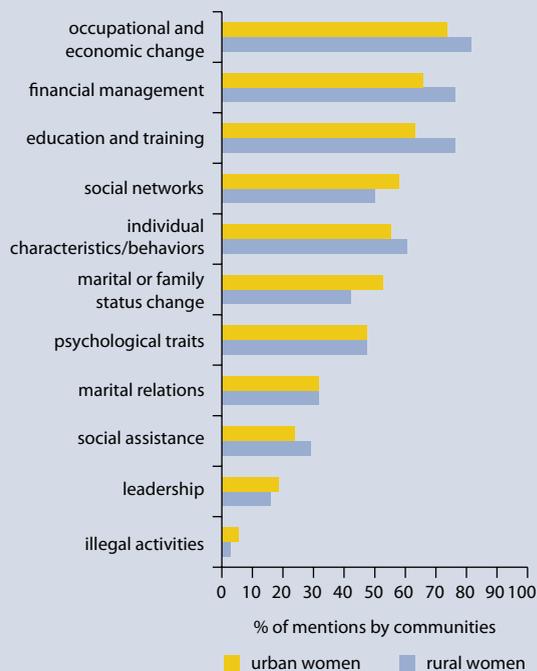
What gives women power? Conversations with almost 2,000 women across 19 countries show that they depend on a combination of factors to feel empowered.¹ “Increased confidence to manage the house independently,” “more communication with neighbors and community members,” the ability to “go out of house to do marketing, shopping, and other household work such as paying electricity and water bills,” “increased control of financial transactions in and outside the house,” and “husband’s support and permission to go outside of the house” were the main answers of women in Bhubaneswar, India, when asked to describe what it meant to be powerful and free. Similarly, rural women from Paro, Bhutan, associated gains in power with education, spouse’s and family members’ support, and hard work—but also with education programs for women who have missed school and with role models such as elected female community leaders who “have helped women think better” and female small business owners who have prospered and boosted the confidence of the women in their community.

The characteristics of a powerful woman that come up most often are related to generating and managing income, followed closely by acquiring an education, and then by personal traits and access to social networks (spread figure 1.1).

It is also clear that no single factor can explain changes in empowerment. Any one factor may be present for many women with different levels of power and may even determine gains or losses in power, depending on other factors operating in women’s lives. For example, changes in marital and family conditions create opportunities for some women when “the husband supports his wife” (Papua New Guinea), or if they “get a good and understanding husband who can allow her to do business and engage in educational activities” (Tanzania). And even a divorce can be positive. “Divorce can free a woman from a lot of strains and she’ll become stronger,” recognized women in West Bank and Gaza. But for other women the same process can have the opposite effect: “a woman can fall [can lose power] if she loses her husband, her children, or the support of her parents” (Burkina Faso). “If you have three children and your husband dies, a single income would not be sufficient” (Peru). “[A] divorce when the man leaves the wife it’s even worse than death for her” (Poland).

Women’s pathways to empowerment are determined by different combinations of factors. To trace such pathways, women in each country were asked to place 100 representative women from their community on differ-

SPREAD FIGURE 1.1 Main factors in moving up the ladder



Source: WDR 2012 team calculations, based on “Defining Gender in the 21st Century: A Multi-Country Assessment” (dataset).

ent steps on a fictional “ladder of power and freedom”—with the top step for women with the most power and the bottom for those with the least. They were also asked to repeat this ranking to reflect where the women would have been on the ladder 10 years ago. In 79 percent of cases, women saw a dramatic upward movement in the past 10 years (almost 20 percentage points larger than men’s perception of their gains in power in the same period). But that was not so in all cases. A community in rural South Africa saw 80 percent of its women as being at the bottom of the ladder, “All of us here are struggling, so we have little power, and we are not free to do what we want to do because we do not have money,” explained one woman. They mentioned not having savings and having difficulty purchasing basic goods, “What can they possibly save, because whatever little money they have they spend on food. It is very difficult to think about savings if you hardly get money and you are always hungry because the little you might get you want it to make your children happy at least for that day,” said another woman. They also pointed to

the daunting number of people suffering from HIV/AIDS. A powerless woman “*is often sick, her health is unstable, and she cannot even access health facilities because the clinic is very far and she does not have money for transport,*” and “*her husband is likely to be sick.*”

In the Dominican Republic's capital city, Santo Domingo, women reported fast upward movement on their ladders thanks to two factors: “*now women study more and work more.*” In Afghanistan's Jabal Saraj, where women placed 60 of the 100 women on the top step, twice the number of 10 years before, a larger combination of conditions was identified: “*In the past, women did just home chores like cooking at home and warming the oven, but now there are possibilities such as gas and electricity.*” “*Now some women have jobs out of the house and most of the girls are going to school.*” And women have “*participated in election as candidates for provincial council and others.*”

Each community had its own stories to explain changes in women's power, but many elements were the same from community to community. To understand the main commonalities and combinations of factors driving female empowerment, a comparative qualitative analysis combining dimensions of agency with the structure of opportunities in the community and the national human development level was conducted.² The variables included:

- *Dimensions of agency.* Women's control over assets, control over family formation, freedom from domestic violence, freedom of physical mobility, and bridging social capital—from community networks to family support and friends.
- *Specific characteristics of the community environment or structure of opportunities.* Informal institutions (level of pressure to conform to gender norms and positive/negative vision of gender norms); formal institutions (presence of services in the community such as transport, schools, health, electricity, and water); and economic opportunities for women and markets (availability of jobs and share of women working in the community).
- *General national context for human development*—measured by the country's score on the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index (HDI).

Various combinations of these factors were tested to distinguish the necessary conditions for women's empowerment in each case, the common explanations across countries and cultures, and the factors that were sufficient by themselves to explain gains in power and

freedom in relation to other constraints and barriers that women were facing.

A higher national HDI or a low prevalence of domestic violence was sufficient to explain women's empowerment gains in half the communities across all countries. Either factor by itself counters negative conditions, such as restricted mobility or lack of jobs.

For rural women, participation in social networks—organizations and networks for women in the community, their relevance in the community, and the presence of female leaders—was a key factor. Higher social capital and network presence countered obstacles like domestic violence in 25 percent of the communities. Social capital is the only factor that allows women to feel empowered even when facing high levels of domestic violence in their communities. In its absence, women have to increase their agency on many aspects—freedom of movement, control over family formation, and control of assets—to counter the disempowering force of domestic violence. Restrictions in any of the other agency conditions are less binding if domestic violence incidence is low.

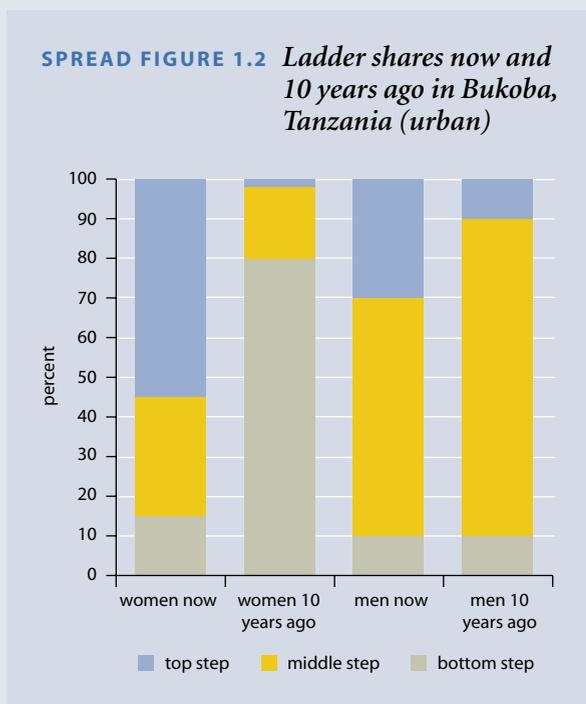
Urban women depend as much on the local structure of opportunities—availability of jobs for women and a dynamic labor market—as they do on social capital. In fact, when both come together, lack of control over family formation or high incidence of domestic violence becomes less of an obstacle. When social capital is not strong, the relevance of the local structure of opportunities increases, but it needs to be paired with other positive gains in agency such as increased control over assets or freedom of movement and of violence threats for women to move up their power ladder.

These different combinations show that pathways may vary, but some combinations drive women's gains faster and better. The effect of any factor is likely to depend on the configuration of other factors—the role of economic opportunities will depend on each woman's ability to move freely as well as on asset ownership and social capital.

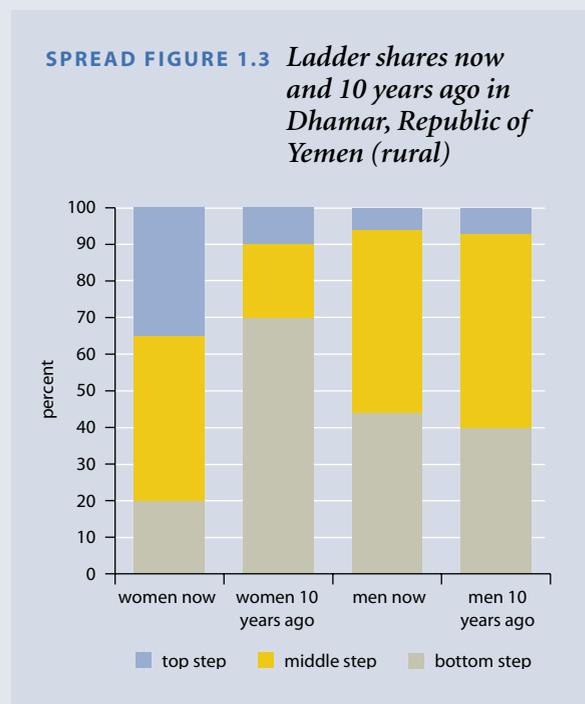
What do these pathways look like? Two examples from two communities:

“*A woman who is powerful is called omukazi [powerful woman]. I think most of us here are powerful women,*” says Joyce in Bukoba, Tanzania, after acknowledging that the lives of women in her community have prospered, “*Yes, women have always moved up. I was married, and I really suffered with my husband. When I left him, it is when I started doing my things and I am now very fine: I can get what I want; I can do what I want; I take my children to school*” (spread figure 1.2).

For women in Bukoba, social capital has been the key element. The community has a good array of organiza-



Source: WDR 2012 team calculations, based on "Defining Gender in the 21st Century: A Multi-Country Assessment" (dataset).



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tions helping women, and 33 percent of the local council members are female. Women recognize the value of their networks: "We have these self-help groups, we meet there and talk about so many things that happen in our lives. You get advice from your fellow woman on how to deal with men who disturb you in your family or how to do business." "Once you get the right group and listen to what they say, you get up." Friends also have a central role: "These are the people you count on as woman. They will give you advice. They form part of the groups you belong to. And when you have quarrels with your husband, they will be the first ones to come and assist. If you have small children, they will always keep an eye on your children."

But social capital is not enough to increase women's empowerment. It needs to be combined with a good structure of opportunities and services, which women in Bukoba also seem to have: "You can go to the factory and ask for different kinds of jobs, such as sweeping, cleaning dishes or the compound, and even becoming their agent to buy and bring fish to the factory." Favorable laws are also in place: "It is easy because the law is clear. No one loses as such: you want to divorce, you divide the property, and each one goes his or her way."

Women in Bukoba also recognize the barriers that prevent other women in the community from gaining power and freedom: "The moment you know that you can do things by yourself and not depend on a man is the moment you begin going up. I see some women being beaten

by their husband every day and they are there. When you talk to them, they say they are married and they cannot separate. These women will never climb the ladder; they will stay at the bottom."

In rural Dhamar in the Republic of Yemen, women also see themselves moving up despite low economic participation and education in their community (spread figure 1.3). Like the Bukoba women, their pathway includes social capital—in this case in the shape of informal networks—as well as some gains in education, all in an environment with too few opportunities and some mobility restrictions. "Men can finish their education; men have the freedom to go out and to learn [but] women visit each other in their free time and chat," said Fatima and Ghalya when comparing their happiness with men's. In their community, a powerful woman would have many acquaintances and friends, while a woman with little power "is the woman who doesn't have influence among Dhamar's women."

Women in Dhamar see two factors as the most pressing: having an education, and being able to move more freely. Having freedom means having the ability to move within the village. But most women cannot travel outside the village without appropriate companionship: "A woman cannot work outside the village unless she has Mahram (male legal guardian) with her." Gaining mobility will allow them to finish their education and those who dropped out of school to resume it. "If there is

transportation, they will let me learn, and I can become a teacher," says a young woman. Job aspirations are linked to mobility restrictions: "Work opportunities are limited inside the village except teaching, and recruitment for men in agricultural work." Although these Yemeni women experience many difficulties, they nonetheless see improvements in their power and freedom over the previous generations.

NOTES

1. The study economies include Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, the Dominican Republic, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Liberia, Moldova, North Sudan, Peru, Papua New Guinea, Poland, Serbia, South Africa, Tanzania, Vietnam, West Bank and Gaza, and the Republic of Yemen. The focus groups included male adults, female adults, male youth, female youth, male adolescents, and female adolescents; the adolescent groups were conducted only in a subset of 8 of the 19 coun-

tries. For further information, the assessment methodology can be found at <http://www.worldbank.org/wdr2012>.

2. Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fs/QCA). For references, see Ragin (2008) and Ragin (2000). The technique allows for testing models of different pathways to achieve an end, in this case, the levels of empowerment reported by the women in the various community groups. Given the nature of qualitative data—textual and representative of individuals' voices, perceptions, and experiences—comparing across countries and communities is done by measuring different degrees in the cases that fit each model (membership degrees).

REFERENCES

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