Title: Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture: Lessons from Qualitative Research

There is growing recognition of the importance of women’s empowerment in its own right and for a range of development outcomes, but less understanding of what empowerment means to rural women and men. The challenge of measuring empowerment, particularly across cultures and contexts, is also garnering attention. This presentation will report on qualitative research conducted conjointly with quantitative surveys, working with 13 agricultural development projects in 9 countries, to develop a project-level Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI). The qualitative research sought to identify emic meanings of “empowerment”, validate the domains and indicators of the quantitative index, provide greater understanding of the context of each project, and test a methodology for integrating quantitative and qualitative methods in assessments of empowerment.

Despite challenges in translating the concept of “empowerment” across different cultures, the interviews revealed similarities among perceptions of women’s empowerment across contexts – nuances that informed the development of pro-WEAI. Economic status was an important component, meaning that empowered women can take care of themselves, their families, and their communities. Women’s empowerment was seen more positively when it was not just an individual attribute, but used to “lift the burden” of others as well. Both men and women reacted negatively to the notion of women having power over others, especially men. Results also showed interconnections between different quantitative indicators of empowerment. Women’s workloads and domestic responsibilities may limit their mobility and ability to earn income, two common measures of empowerment. Group membership can be empowering, but time and mobility mediate women’s ability to participate in groups.

Such findings offer three critical insights. First, they provide projects with guidance on strategies that can contribute to women’s empowerment, and allow them to interpret quantitative results of the pro-WEAI. Then, they reveal where conceptions of empowerment among researchers may diverge from those of rural women and men, enabling future development programming and research to be more sensitive to the norms and beliefs shaping rural livelihoods. Finally, they shed light on the importance of qualitative research to provide rich contextual data for assessing empowerment, and a methodology that can be used in this pursuit.