

Abstract

THPE0641 - "When you have your own money you buy what you want and you don't have to beg money from a man": the IMAGE study – understanding empowerment from the eyes of rural South African women

L. Ndhlovu¹, J. Kim¹, G. Phetla¹, J. Busza², C. Watts², J. Hargreaves², J. Porter², L. Morison², P. Pronyk¹

¹University of the Witwatersrand, RADAR, Acornhoek, South Africa, ²London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, United Kingdom

Background: Researchers are increasingly interested in understanding and measuring the concept of “empowerment” in relation to gender violence, HIV, and other health outcomes. Yet there is little known about how women – particularly poor rural women define or perceive their own empowerment.

Methods: As part of a cluster randomized HIV prevention trial in South Africa, we conducted 7 focus group discussions among 46 women participating in a microfinance plus Gender and HIV training program. The facilitator used open-ended questions to stimulate a discussion of how participants defined empowerment, what they viewed as empowering or disempowering, and community perceptions of empowered women. Quantitative results are presented elsewhere.

Results: There was no equivalent word for “empowerment” in the local language (SePedi). Rather, women used phrases such as “*matla a hlabulogo*” (the ability to claim personal power and use it to change for the better). Although some women alluded to challenging gender norms, and the broader social and political status of women, most defined empowerment within the spheres of household and community life. The ability to provide financially for one’s family clearly emerged as an important dimension of power. However, as one woman put it: “you can have money and still not be empowered”. For these women, other important aspects included: having self confidence; being able to make household decisions, possessing knowledge, and being able to share it with others; and being able to communicate well, especially with children and partners.

Conclusions: Our study suggests that, in the context of rural poverty, women’s definitions of empowerment reflect the reality of their daily lives. As some have suggested, addressing women’s “practical needs” may be an important first step in enabling women themselves to define and address underlying inequalities. Participatory methods and qualitative research can be useful for ensuring that quantitative measures of women’s empowerment reflect these local realities.