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## Measuring Women Empowerment: Lessons Learnt from applying Pro-WEAI in Ethiopia



**A Case Study by IGNITE**  
July 2024

**The Impacting Gender and Nutrition through Innovative Technical Exchange in Agriculture (IGNITE)** project was a technical assistance programme, implemented by Tanager and its learning partners, in four African countries from 2018–2024. The project supported 35 African agricultural institutions across 18 countries to integrate gender and nutrition into their business operations and agricultural interventions.



# Measuring Women Empowerment

## Lessons Learnt from applying Pro-WEAI in Ethiopia

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### Introduction

Women's empowerment is a complex concept to measure in development research. The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) provides a standardised way to measure agency and participation in decision-making for female farmers. While the full WEAI survey is generally used by governments and national initiatives to measure progress towards women's empowerment in agriculture on a national scale, the IGNITE project deployed several modules from the Pro-WEAI empowerment framework to assess the extent and impact of women's involvement in decision-making on teff farming (in the context of a study on best practice adoption in Ethiopia). In the process, the project learnt that implementing a standardised tool in a new, highly localised environment is not without its challenges. This case study shares insights into the lessons learnt, and suggestions for adapting some of the Pro-WEAI modules to the local context.

### Assessing Women's Decision-Making in Teff Farming

The aim of this study was to identify which gender factors influence decision-making on the adoption of best practices (BPs) in teff farming households in the West Gojjam region of Amhara regional state in Ethiopia. IGNITE carried out three rounds of a quantitative household survey with a final sample of 555 households, where one adult man and one adult woman were interviewed in each round. The surveys were complemented by 9 focus group discussions, 12 in-depth interviews with farmers, and 4 key informant interviews with development agents and teff crop experts.

### Methodology

In Ethiopia, existing research suggests that decisions around best practice adoption are governed by many factors. The evidence indicates that each decision involves the husband and wife in varying degrees, with the husband typically playing a more

dominant role, and women almost never making decisions autonomously.

Most agricultural surveys approach the household as a unit, speaking only to one person and taking those responses as representative of the entire household. Given that the aim of this research was to explore intra-household decision-making, IGNITE's approach targeted one man and one woman per household and asked them about their participation and involvement in household decision-making through selected Pro-WEAI modules (summarised below). This produced multiple perspectives into household dynamics, and allowed the researchers to speak to women who are often not considered as the primary respondents of agricultural household surveys.

Another key consideration was the complexity of the decision-making process in farm households. Researchers studying decision-making classify households as male, female, or joint decision-making households, to indicate who the primary decision-maker is on certain household decisions (e.g., technology adoption, savings, production, expenditures). While helpful, this categorization often masks the complexity of household decision-making, in that it is difficult to define what constitutes a 'joint' decision. For example, if a husband makes the final decision, but consults his wife in the process, should this be labelled a male-led or joint decision? Furthermore, the labels do not always feel relevant to households with other structures (e.g., polygamous households, households with extended family structure where additional family members participate in decision-making). There is also ongoing debate about whether joint decision-making or sole decision-making is preferable in terms of outcomes, and under what circumstances. In the WEAI framework on input into productive decisions, empowerment is assessed on whether a respondent has any form of decision-making power (sole or joint) but does not value one higher than the other. IGNITE therefore employed the Pro-WEAI in order to steer clear of such normative judgments with respect to which form of decision-making is preferable.

## Overview of WEAI

The WEAI is a standardised survey tool used to measure women's empowerment and inclusion in the agricultural sector. It was developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), and USAID's Feed the Future. The Project WEAI (Pro-WEAI) version of the tool consists of three inter-related dimensions: agency, resources, and achievements, and is made up of 10 indicators (and 2 optional indicators) that measure three types of agency: intrinsic agency (power within),

instrumental agency (power to), and collective agency (power with). IGNITE's study employed the following Pro-WEAI modules to measure dimensions of empowerment that were relevant for the research questions:

### Pro-WEAI Modules Used in the Teff Study

- 1.1 Input in Productive Decisions: Decisions about Agricultural Production
- 2.1 Access to Productive Resources: Asset Ownership
- 2.3 Access to Productive Resources: Access to Credit and Financial Services
- 3.0 Control over use of income
- 4.1 Leadership in the Community: Group Memberships

Optional Module: Woman's Health and Nutrition

## Implementing Pro-WEAI in Ethiopia

This section highlights some of the challenges the research team faced in implementing the Pro-WEAI in Ethiopia, and how the team mitigating them.

### Challenges and Mitigation

The primary challenges the research team encountered include the following:

1. Adapting questions to the local context. Some questions pertaining to the household's asset endowments or nutrition did not always make sense in the West Gojjam context. IGNITE therefore adapted these questions wherever possible to reflect the farmers' lived realities.
2. Changing the wording of the questions, to minimise bias and accurately capture the decision-making processes the study was looking at.
3. Mitigating enumerator effects, by restructuring questions to minimise bias and explore all decision-making dimensions that feed into the classification of respondents as empowered or not empowered.
4. Defining decision-making in line with local social norms: Farmers may not relate to decision-making in line with the Pro-WEAI framework. This is why IGNITE conducted additional qualitative research to delve deeper into the norms and dynamics underpinning agricultural decisions.



## 1. Adapting questions to the local context

### Examples not locally relevant

#### Women and men do not always agree

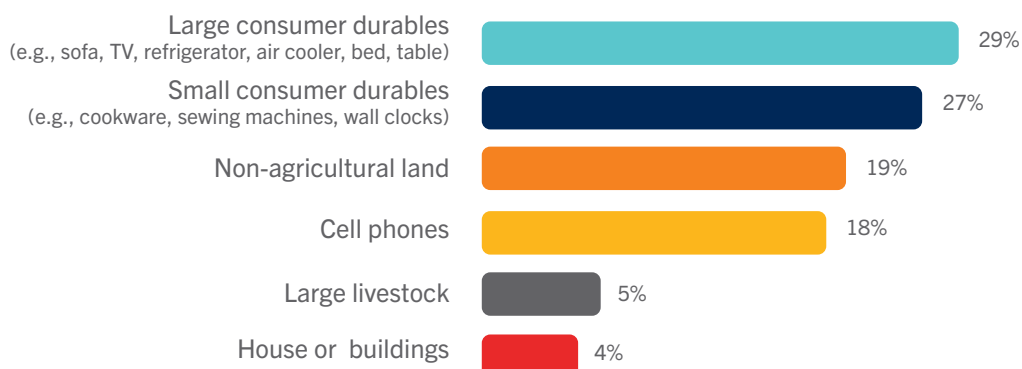
During the first round of data collection, IGNITE found that intra-household disagreement on asset ownership was common. As part of the Access to Productive Resources: Asset Ownership module of the Pro-WEAI, women and men are asked if their household owns certain assets. Men and women in the same household often gave different responses when asked about certain assets and items — for example, 29% of households diverged with respect to owning large consumer durables, 27% on whether they own small consumer durables, 19% disagreed with respect to non-agricultural land ownership, 18% disagreed on cell phone ownership, and 4.5% disagreed on cattle ownership. One possible cause of these discrepancies may be respondents reporting their own individual assets, as perceived by them, as opposed to household assets (as requested by the survey).

A second possible explanation is poor intra-household communication, whereby some respondents genuinely do not know about assets owned by another individual in the household, which is more likely for smaller or more individually held assets like cell phones. Another possible reason is ambiguity in the definition of assets or ownership, and different perceptions by different individuals. Finally, there is also the possibility of ‘enumerator effects’ – that is, a systematic difference in the way enumerators collected or recorded answers to the questions, leading to bias. While these reporting differences are common in other studies with multiple respondents per household, the IGNITE research team wanted to delve deeper into the definition of assets as presented in the WEAI and explore the asset categories where they found the most disagreement. The figure below shows the level of disagreement between men and women regarding the household’s ownership of certain assets.

The way assets are defined and grouped in the Pro-WEAI may not be relevant for the local context. For instance, the study population in the IGNITE study resides in an area which predominantly has no access to electricity. When asked about large consumer durables, an asset category where the study found large disagreement in reported household ownership between men and women, respondents had to indicate whether they own items such as a refrigerator, TV, an air cooler or a sofa. The study wanted to keep as close to the standardised Pro-WEAI module as possible in order to maintain comparability with data from other studies. However, WEAI does not provide an exhaustive list for this category and the research team therefore decided to expand the examples to include furniture such as tables and beds. In retrospect, this disparate list of items may have led to confusion among respondents. Not having data from the field on what typical asset endowments in the study location would be, made deciding on these examples a challenge.

Following data collection in rural Ethiopia, the research team found out it is common for every household to own a bed (typically the couple’s). On the other hand, given the very low share of households with access to electricity (14%) in the study area, it was highly unlikely that any household would own any of the electronic appliances that fall under this category. The answer to this question can therefore range from 100% ownership for furniture like beds, to 0% ownership for refrigerators or air coolers, depending on how the respondents understand the question, and what examples the enumerators choose to give. This is the case too with the small consumer durables category, which includes items such as cookware, sewing machines, or wall clocks. It is customary for rural households in Ethiopia to own cookware for food preparation, but items such as sewing machines are highly uncommon and are typically owned by service providers such as tailors in larger rural communities. The answers here can therefore also fluctuate widely depending on the respondents’ understanding of small durables. This poses a problem for the quality of data, as it

Percentage of women and men in the same household who disagree on whether the household owns an asset



disagree or have different understanding of what these asset categories refer to.

### Choice of foods not culturally relevant

Pro-WEAI includes two optional modules on women's health and nutrition. As part of the nutrition module, the IGNITE study asked both male and female respondents about their household's decision-making process with respect to buying large quantities of food (over 5 kg), small quantities of food (under 5 kg), individual food groups (such as meat, eggs, dairy or vegetables), as well as decision-making and preferences on who decides what the household can eat, and what foods to prepare. While the study found very consistent answers between men and women with respect to the household's dietary and food preparation decisions, the research team encountered difficulties when administering questions about the purchase and consumption of eggs, milk and milk products, meat, and poultry, as these were not relevant for the staple Ethiopian diet in rural areas. For instance, respondents were asked about their purchasing patterns for these items on normal days. However, these food items are typically not part of a day-to-day diet in the study area but are rather consumed on special occasions. Furthermore, many of these items are produced within the household (particularly eggs and dairy products), which means purchasing behaviour does not accurately reflect consumption patterns. Another consideration is how religious practices impact dietary practices. For example, Ethiopia Orthodox Christians (the majority in the study area) do not consume animal products on Wednesdays and Fridays, as well as during multiple fasting periods in the year. The timing of asking these questions can therefore impact the answers provided, depending on the day of the week or the period of the year.

**Mitigation recommendation:** To better understand a household's endowments, it is crucial to use assets that are relevant for the local context, and to group them in categories with relatively similar ownership rates. As WEAI is a standardised tool that aims to enable comparisons in empowerment between countries, researchers have to make the decision between preserving as much of the original WEAI structure as possible, in order to remain faithful to the methodology of assessing empowerment, and being mindful of the local context, which may not be accurately depicted in the content of the questions. While the research team did not change the definition of assets included in the survey for this study, IGNITE took these lessons learnt forward and implemented them for another study using the Pro-WEAI in Ethiopia. The team changed the definition of large consumer

durables to include TVs, sofas, and gas or electric stoves, and small consumer durables to include radios, solar-powered lamps, wall clocks, and watches. For the nutrition module, the research team listened to the ongoing feedback from the enumerators on the ground and changed the question relating to meat, dairy and eggs to include purchases and consumption on festive days as well, since these food groups are typically consumed on religious holidays and special occasions. Doing so enabled the study to collect more accurate data from farmers, instead of the standard 'Not applicable/household does not purchase this' answer.

## 2. Changing the wording of the questions

### Choice of words leading to different responses

We observed during data collection how the wording of decision-making questions in the Input into Productive Decisions Pro-WEAI module may result in slightly different answers. For instance, joint decision-making between spouses is reported more often if a question is open ('who usually makes a decision?'), than in replies to specific questions about who made decisions ('who made this decision this season?'). To avoid this effect, the research team asked questions both about decisions made this season, as well as about the general decision-making process.

Another example is the case of decision-making on farming of staple grains, which is one of the standard questions in the Input into Productive Decisions module. In the IGNITE study, the research team opted to split this category into two – farming of teff specifically, and then farming of other grains – to focus on the crop of interest. This allowed the study to identify decision-making patterns in more detail, as teff is typically considered a male-dominated crop, while women may have more involvement in the farming of other grains.

### Lost in translation and cultural context

In addition to being mindful of the wording the study used, the research team also paid attention to the way the meaning of the questions is carried across in Amharic. The wording used for some questions in English was uncommon or did not translate well, so these were simplified in their Amharic version, for ease comprehension. For instance, 'How much input did you have in decisions about how much of the outputs of staple grain farming and processing of the harvest of other grains that are grown primarily for food consumption to keep for consumption at home rather than selling?' became 'What is your input when a decision is made about what portion of other crops is to be sold and what portion is to be kept at home (for home consumption)?'.

Generally, when translating questions about decision-making on staple grain farming and processing of the harvest, phrasing and capturing the exact meaning of ‘processing the harvest’ in Amharic was difficult. ‘Processing of the harvest’ is translated in the Amharic as ‘gathering of the harvest’. This Amharic translation is the closest in meaning to the English version. However, it does not capture the different aspects of ‘harvest processing’, including pounding, grinding, packaging, soaking, drying, whitening, milling, etc., which are also not captured in the English version of the question. The problem with asking this question in its existing form in the Pro-WEAI and its Amharic translation is that it would lead respondents to conceptualise ‘harvest processing’ narrowly and equate it with ‘harvest gathering’ alone, therefore implicitly asking who the decision maker is only for this activity. However, for some of activities that could fall under ‘harvest processing’, women may have more responsibilities and could also be the primary decision makers, while for others, men assume the primary decision-maker role and its accompanying responsibilities.

**Mitigation recommendation:** Being mindful of how a question’s wording or translation can influence responses is key. Sometimes the question can be broken down into parts, to capture the decision-making process more accurately, or slightly rephrased, to increase the respondents’ understanding. In terms of content, in the case of harvest processing, the research team believes that including

a more elaborate definition that lists all activities associated with it in both the English and Amharic versions may also capture the decision-making dynamics pertaining to harvest processing more accurately. This question could then be broken down into multiple questions corresponding to the various activities associated with harvest processing, in order to more accurately identify who the primary decision maker is at each stage.

### 3. Mitigating enumerator effects

#### Identifying the enumerator effect

An ‘enumerator effect’ is a source of bias in research that stems from a systematic difference in the way enumerators collected or recorded answers to the questions. The Pro-WEAI Input in Productive Decisions module begins the question ‘Did you participate in the following activities in the past 12 months?’ with a list of activities for enumerators to read out loud. The relevance of all subsequent questions in the module is determined by the responses to this question. The way that this survey module is structured creates high dependency on this first multiple-choice question. In other words, when the question is structured as a multiple-choice, enumerators can choose to omit decision areas from the list, not read it out in its entirety to participants, and limit themselves to 2-3 activities, while skipping the rest.

This question was found to be prone to enumerator

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#### Pro-WEAI Module on Input into Productive Decisions

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Q1: Did you participate in the following activities in the past 12 months?


*You may select multiple*

- |                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Teff farming and processing  |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Staple grain (rice, maize, wheat, millet) farming and processing   |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Horticultural or high value crop farming and processing of harvest |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Large livestock raising and processing of milk / meat              |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Small livestock raising and processing of milk / meat              |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Poultry / other small animal raising & processing of eggs / meat   |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Fishpond culture   |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Non-farm economic activities                                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Wage and salary employment   |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | None of these  |

**All future questions in the module depend on the responses to this question.** 

Enumerators were systematically under-reporting selections on this question, with some enumerators almost always selecting just two categories.

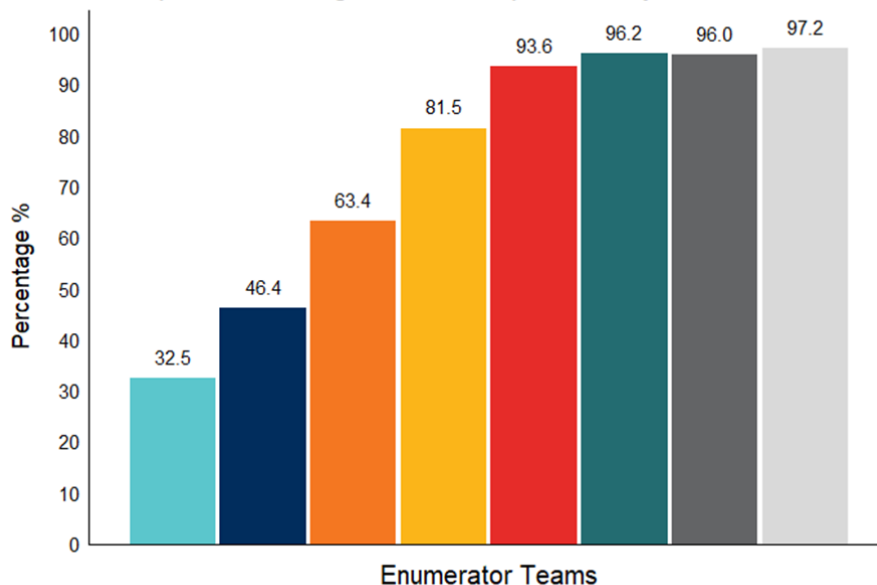
This leads to an under-reporting of empowerment.

 To mitigate this enumerator effect, we changed the structure of the questionnaire to ask about each of the choice options individually, rather than using a multiple selection field.

effects in the IGNITE study and a large source of bias. Using data from the first round of data collection, the research team were able to accurately predict whether a respondent will be classified as empowered or not based on the number of decision areas selected on this initial question. In addition, the study found significant variation by enumeration teams. Approximately 50% of the variation in the resulting WEAI indicator could be explained by the enumeration team that visited the household. In theory, the enumerator team should have no influence on empowerment, and these percentages should be similar for all teams.

tacit assumption that rural households follow an individualistic, rational, and straightforward model of decision-making, where an agenda is set every season, household members bring their individual perspectives and interests to the table, a decision on the agenda is made and the household follow through to implement that decision. Such an approach may run the risk of ignoring social norms, nuanced processes and factors that influence decision making and its outcomes, as well as unexpected changes in decisions.

Share of respondents categorised as empowered by enumeration team



**Mitigation recommendation:** To mitigate enumerator effects in the WEAI ‘Input in Productive Decisions’ module the research team restructured the module to remove the multiple-select initial filter question and replaced it with a series of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions. This meant that the enumerators ticked each activity one by one and gained more meaningful responses from participants. In parallel, the research team added additional in-field monitoring checks for this issue to all subsequent rounds of data collection and conducted refresher training with the enumeration team between survey rounds 1 and 2, with a specific focus on interpretation of the survey questions and interviewer neutrality. This approach eliminated the enumerator effects the research team had observed.

#### 4. Defining decision-making in line with local social norms

##### Decision-making is complex

On a conceptual level, questions in the WEAI about decision making seem to come from a

##### Social norms shape decision-making

IGNITE found a strong social norm towards notions of joint ownership of assets and income. Men are seen as the final decision-maker and referred to as such by female household members, but his decision is expected to benefit the entire household, and assets are seen as joint property, and often also registered under both the husband and wife’s names. This makes assessing notions of ownership and control over assets, or control over the use of income, less straightforward. For example, in the case of selling the teff harvest or selling a large asset such as a cow, farmers expect the household to be in agreement, with many male farmers stating that although the wife may ultimately defer to the man for the final decision, failing to secure her agreement is likely to result in a divorce. Misallocating the income resulting from such sales is also regarded as a grave breach of trust. While the men are seen as the primary decision-makers with respect to uses of income resulting from teff, it is expected that the income will be spent on household investments and not on individual purchases. Women’s participation in the decision-making process is therefore less explicit, but their influence stems from their





ability by both men and women to walk away and dissolve the family unit if the man's decisions do not consider the household's interests as a whole. Farmers' perception of self as an individual and as part of a community or family unit can therefore influence how they perceive and approach the decision-making process, and how they understand the questions in the WEAI.

## Recommendations

The Pro-WEAI is a powerful tool that researchers and development practitioners can use to assess women's empowerment in agriculture. However, it is important to adapt the tool to the local context to ensure high quality data. For IGNITE's study in Ethiopia, these adaptations included rephrasing of questions, removing answer choice options, restructuring of modules, and even re-collecting data when quality was not high. These adaptations can only be identified and ultimately made through a deep understanding of local context. For research teams implementing the Pro-WEAI in Ethiopia or any other country, IGNITE recommends taking the following steps to ensure they get the most out of the collected data:

- 1. Embed in local context:** The research team must be embedded in the local context to identify these limitations. Having a deep understanding of culture and customs will uncover sources of bias that may otherwise be unnoticed or lead to incorrect interpretation.
- 2. Rigorous field piloting of instruments:** Even standardised survey modules (like the WEAI) need to be rigorously tested in the field before use. Local customs and culture vary drastically both within and between countries, so adapting survey modules to your specific context is essential.
- 3. Monitoring of incoming data for anomalies:** Live monitoring of data as it is collected and maintaining strong lines of communication with the data collection team will allow for identification of any anomalies in the data.
- 4. Qualitative data is essential:** Adding a qualitative component to the study allows for a richer understanding of context, including social norms.

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## IGNITE Partners

**Tanager**, an ACDI/VOCA affiliate, is a global development organization that empowers people to realize life-changing economic and social opportunities. We have 30 years of experience implementing gender-transformative and nutrition-sensitive agriculture approaches, connecting actors across the production supply chain, fostering knowledge and access for women and other marginalized groups, and unlocking sustainable, climate-smart economic opportunities for all.

**Laterite** is a data, research, and advisory firm dedicated to providing high-quality research services for social impact in East Africa. We provide technical advice on the design and implementation of research projects, development interventions, and socio-economic policies. We strive to deliver impactful research that helps decision-makers find solutions to complex development problems.

**60 Decibels** is a tech-enabled social impact measurement and customer intelligence company, spun out of Acumen. We make it easy for companies and organizations to listen to the people who matter most. Using our Lean Data approach, we collect social impact and customer feedback data through phone surveys and other methods.

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