

## **Using Research to Advance International Development: Women’s Empowerment as a Case Study<sup>1</sup>**

### **Convening Framing Paper**

**Dr. Audra Grant**

#### **Introduction**

Research in the context of international development has a long and storied history within United States Agency for International Development (USAID), one that has led to advances in health and, most recently, digital development. In order for USAID to continue to build on its successes, however, the Center for Development Research (CDR) of the U.S. Global Development Lab recognizes the value of building USAID’s role as an actor within a broader ecosystem to drive the generation of research for development and its more effective use in program and policymaking that impacts the lives of beneficiaries around the world. Within that context, CDR strives to generate or more effectively use research. This includes providing:

- Guidance, technical assistance, and training on the conduct and management of USAID-funded research and the use of research evidence for development—informed by USAID and United States Government (USG) scientific research policies
- Fellowship programs to enlist the research expertise of scientific, engineering, and medical professionals for development
- Technical assistance to support the development of research-related strategies, policies, programs, and procurement mechanisms
- Expertise on how to utilize networks, research institutions, and higher education institutions as development partners
- Technical assistance for co-creation of programs, with an emphasis on working with higher education institutions
- Support to USAID Missions, Bureaus and Independent Offices (M/B/IOs) via a suite of research utilization–focused mechanisms that are agnostic to region and sector expertise on strengthening low- and middle-income country capacity to undertake research targeted to solve pressing development challenges in their own countries.

**Why the convening?** The USAID Journey to Self-Reliance calls on the Agency to be intentional and strategic regarding investments across the development portfolio.<sup>2</sup> Research is a critical way to support decision-making, and local research is a vital part of the pathway that can facilitate the journey to self-reliance. The convening “Using Research to Advance International Development: Women’s Empowerment as a Case Study,” sponsored by CDR, therefore seeks to encourage the use of research to integrate actionable strategies and recommendations into development programming and activities.

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<sup>2</sup>The Journey to Self-Reliance is USAID’s new strategy that redirects Agency strategies, partnership models, and program practices to achieve greater development outcomes, such that host governments and partners no longer require foreign assistance. Launched in 2018, the approach prioritizes mobilization of public and private revenue, local capacity, and enterprise-driven development.

This framing paper, which provides foundational background and a framework for the convening, is organized as follows: The first section discusses why women’s empowerment is important and offers a working definition to inform the convening dialogue. We then consider what is meant by research and research utilization, when research is used, and the stakeholders that are relevant to the current research utilization effort and its subject matter, women’s empowerment.

The third section outlines the challenges associated with achieving effective utilization, and the fourth socializes convening participants to the research utilization exercise by summarizing the key takeaways from case study vignettes in the area of entrepreneurship, digital technology, education, and health. We then provide an overview of best practices for effective utilization and, finally, offer concluding remarks.

## **Women’s Empowerment: Why Does It Matter?**

Women’s empowerment is a widely recognized global objective and is an essential component of strategies that promote health, education, and combat poverty. Women represent 50 percent of the world’s population, yet are disproportionately subject to discrimination, exploitation, and poverty (UN Women, 2019).<sup>3</sup> Because of gender inequity, women occupy lower-wage jobs, have higher rates of illiteracy than men, less access to technology, and are also exposed to gender-based violence, among other barriers.

**The importance of women’s empowerment and toward its definition** *Women’s empowerment* refers broadly to a process of “personal and social change through which women gain power, meaningful choices, and control of resources and their lives” (Oppenheim Mason, 2005). The paths to women’s empowerment are many and may include changes in the legal, social, political, and economic environment. Empowerment—separate, but linked to gender equity—is not done **to** or **for** women. Instead, women are agents of their empowerment (Kabeer, 1999).

Although there is consensus around the importance of women’s empowerment and its relationship to gender equity, women’s empowerment is, admittedly, a widely contested term. Definitions of women’s empowerment are often derived from value-based assumptions. Indicators are often not well integrated with theory, indicators rarely capture the full range of empowerment, and there are biases in analyzing data (Gram *et al.*, 2018, p. 1350).

One perspective, however, posits that women’s empowerment may: a) concern an individual or collective; b) involve removing internal psychological barriers or external interpersonal barriers; c) be defined by the woman acting as her own agent or by external agents; d) require agents to acquire a degree of independence or require others to “empower” them through social support; and e) concern the number of present choices available to a woman or the motivations behind past choices (Gram *et al.*).<sup>4</sup> Thus stakeholders should consider any theoretical, value, and fact-based assumptions when defining and measuring the multi-faceted concept of “women’s empowerment.”

While resolving this debate is beyond the purview of this paper and convening, it is worth noting that definitional dilemmas accompany many concepts. This convening embraces components of the above definition, which captures dimensions of power, control, choice, and agency, but dialogue among participants may find that other definitions are worth consideration.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment>

<sup>4</sup> According to Gram, women’s empowerment is an essentially contested concept that cannot be captured by simply averaging a large number of contrasting measures. Researchers may benefit from clearly defining their theory-, fact-, and value-based assumptions about women’s empowerment before selecting measures of empowerment.

With these thoughts in mind, the convening learning objectives are to:

- Use a sectoral focus to unpack different approaches to research utilization and, through examples of research and discussion, learn how strategies have or have not been applied to women's empowerment programming to take full advantage of research outcomes
- Engage stakeholders to articulate how they use research, in order to appreciate different approaches to utilization in the women's empowerment space
- Articulate challenges from both the researcher and the research consumer stakeholder perspectives and move toward more informed research utilization processes
- Develop recommendations for achieving effective research utilization in women's empowerment work, with an eye toward how these recommendations could translate to other sectors

To keep the scope of the convening more intimate, the following lenses have been chosen as different pathways of advancement in women's entrepreneurship that are more established: education and health—or the more emergent—entrepreneurship and digital technology. As each is a well-established area of research and a robust area of development activity, CDR, through the current convening, seeks a more formal examination of the role of research utilization in advancing development programming and policy decisions to accomplish the above objectives. We now turn to conceptualizations of research.

### **Defining Research and Research Utilization**

**What is research?** Research includes elements from the systematic application of knowledge or understanding, directed toward the production of useful materials, to the creation of devices and systems or methods, including design, development, and improvement of prototypes and new processes to meet specific requirements.

While research in particular sectors may take on certain strategies to achieve outcomes and goals, looking across sectors through the lens of women's empowerment allows us to look at the higher-level outcomes intended for women's empowerment and see how research strategies across sectors have contributed to these achievements or informed questions/approaches to achieving these outcomes. For research to be effectively used, however, all actors within the ecosystem of research for international development must be engaged in the articulation of tools, services, expertise, and processes that help translate research to effective use.

*Research utilization* refers to “making decisions concerning policy, advocacy and resource allocation, planning and management, and programs' systems development and strengthening, using information generated from valid research” (The Population Council, 2016). Research utilization seeks to bridge the gap between scientific evidence and policy and practice.

Various terms are used to describe research utilization, such as *knowledge translation*, *knowledge management*, *knowledge utilization*, and *research dissemination*, among others.<sup>5</sup> However, authentic research utilization differs from all these references in that it focuses on the ultimate purpose and impact of the study, rather than mere knowledge management or dissemination of results. Specifically, research utilization focuses on what researchers want people to receive from their research results;

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<sup>5</sup> Similarly, many models have been suggested to explain the concept of research utilization in policymaking, some of which include frameworks for knowledge transfer as well as knowledge-driven, problem-solving, interactive, enlightenment, and tactical models. See Walugembe, D.R., Kiwanuka, S.N., Matovu, J.K.B. *et al.* (2015). Utilization of research findings for health policy making and practice: evidence from three case studies in Bangladesh. *Health Res Policy Sys* 13(26). doi:10.1186/s12961-015-0015-x

how they want people to make use of the ideas, information, or products resulting from their research; and how people are actually using these.

In practice, effective research utilization involves the translation of operational research findings into tangible action.<sup>6</sup> There must be an exchange between consumers that can apply research findings (i.e., stakeholders) and the researchers that produce the research. This exchange brings about eventual use of findings in relevant decision-making processes through the implementation of what is called a *research utilization process*. Done properly, effective research utilization can enhance policy decisions regarding resource allocation for services and programs, facilitate innovative changes that lead to improved outcomes, and promote critical thinking and reflective practice. From the researcher perspective, good practices born of effective research utilization validates researcher efforts, motivates new knowledge, and reinforces professional accountability. From the policymaker and implementer perspective, the extent to which research respectively informs specific policies, agendas, and program activities and inputs affects utilization.

**When is research used?** The research utilization is ongoing. It is a process. Often, the process begins with the identification and engagement of key stakeholders who provide input into priority program goals, issues, and questions; this occurs at the same time researchers are designing a given study. It continues with stakeholders engaged during the implementation of the study, the analysis of data, and the planning to translate findings into action.

Research utilization may also occur at the end of the study when stakeholders review the findings and then develop recommendations with the aim of creating or improving policies or programs. There also may be attempts to conduct more research or deepen the application of findings, in activities that build on each other.

**Why a diverse stakeholder audience?** A hallmark of the research utilization process is that stakeholders and researchers are brought together to operationalize research to make the findings more locally relevant and the findings used.<sup>7</sup> To this end, the convening includes diverse participants from each of the following relevant groups of international development actors engaging in the women's empowerment space:

- Implementers with interest in application of development research. A number of participants in this convening will be active implementers with substantial interest and experience in applying development research methodologies to evaluate the effectiveness of development interventions related to women's empowerment.
- Researchers in the field of development interested in the application of current and research strategies and techniques, as well as in improvements in data analysis and data presentation.
- Funders representing organizations (e.g., governmental, private sector, non-governmental organizations, etc.) that finance research and development work and that also have an interest in exploring how development research may be better utilized to measure the effectiveness of their investments. However, evidence and research can guide decisions from project inception and onward.
- Policymakers representing institutions that use development research results to address women's empowerment and, in particular, use research results as the basis for the introduction of new policy and governmental strategies that support development.

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<sup>6</sup> The Population Council. (2016). Project SOAR's approach to research utilization. Washington, D.C.: Population Council.

<sup>7</sup> See FHI360 research utilization process at <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/research-utilization-an-annotated-bibliography.pdf>

This intended distribution of convening participants provides an opportunity for discussion of the strengths, challenges, and potential future improvement in development research techniques, both across multiple actors within a given development sector and within groups of similar actors across the development sectors. As such, the dialogue may provide a unique opportunity to potentially advance development research around women’s empowerment based on multiple views of how to advance the development initiative. The endeavor is not without challenges, however, as the section below describes.

## Issues in Research Utilization

Critically, there is a difference between research results that are *useful* versus results that are *used*. In the case of the former, *useful* research results may merely be interesting or highlight a certain program dynamic heretofore unknown. Research findings that are *used*, by contrast, are actually applied to make adjustments in program design or implementation, or to influence policy. Results can be translated into action and/or practice. For example, impact and performance evaluations of the USAID Literacy and Retention Activity (LARA) program in Uganda—designed to prevent corporal punishment in schools—finds that corporal punishment as a form of gender-based violence, prevents learning and school attendance; and encourages attrition, particularly among girls. Behavior change in corporal punishment and new non-violent discipline methods improve reading skills and retention in primary grades. The most effective interventions are multi-sectoral and embrace a whole-of-community approach. Findings from the evidence-based evaluations may be used to expand programs and target certain stakeholders (see Appendix A for the detailed case study).<sup>8</sup> A number of factors determine effective research utilization. The issues and challenges are varied.

**Striving for scientific rigor.** On the whole, research utilization has rightly focused on producing high-quality research that can be applied to development programming or influence policy (Tseng, 2012). However, synthesis of research evidence and the development of scientific research standards and criteria for research effectiveness is limited across many issue areas, including women’s empowerment. While the issue area of women’s empowerment is admittedly vast and the tasks related to addressing empowerment arduous, the lack of consensus regarding definition and measurement of the concept points to an additional challenge of drawing conclusions around the credibility and quality of research (Gram, 2018). Divergent definitions make this complicated.

**Communication and vocabulary—jargon creep.** Communication is essential for understanding and advancing research. As researchers are required to communicate research to experts in their fields, they frequently use jargon and vocabulary specific to their discipline. Jargon is defined as “the technical terminology or phrase of a special group or activity.”<sup>9</sup> Because researchers are trained to speak in highly specialized language, avoiding jargon is difficult, and there is no single guide for how or when to readjust messages. Yet few would argue that reliance on jargon obstructs research utilization and, in order for research to reach broad audiences, use of accessible language is critical.

**Dissemination and marketing of research findings—the chart as art.** A related issue is the need to further research utilization to stakeholder consumers through production of material that is accessible. Popular products include written policy briefs, reports, and executive summaries that are short and easy to read, websites that are broadly available, central and searchable databases, and

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<sup>8</sup> See Marie-Celine Schulte, “Corporal punishment (CP) as GBV: Evidence of what works for reducing CP and promoting girl’s empowerment in Uganda.”

<sup>9</sup> Rakedzon T., Segev E., Chapnik N., Yosef R., & Baram-Tsabari A. (2017). Automatic jargon identifier for scientists engaging with the public and science communication educators. *PLoS One* 12(8):e0181742. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0181742

attractive packaging. Products are often not designed to suit audience needs and preferences, however. Reports can be long and wordy, and charts and graphics complicated and crowded. The goal is to provide research information that can be understood quickly by audiences that may not have time or the knowledge to absorb complex and/or lengthy narrative or information.

The above challenges to research utilization, however, focus on the supply side of the process from the perspective of research producers. On the other hand, Tseng (2012, 2009) and others (Nutley *et al.*, 2007) offer a reminder that the research utilization process is a “two-way street,” calling attention to the demand side: that is, focusing on how practitioners and policymakers define (research vs. evidence), acquire, interpret, and actually use research.

**Knowing the universe of researcher consumers.** According to Tseng (2012), the research community often makes broad calls to policymakers and practitioners for using research without indicating precisely who the research is specifically intended to reach. Producers of research need to carefully consider the potentially full range of actors that use research.

**Capitalizing on the richness of the research utilization ecosystem.** The focus on research consumers can be too narrow, thus neglecting other actors in the ecosystem. Though the research utilization ecosystem comprises policymakers, implementers, funders, and the like, other stakeholder consumers may be forgotten. For example, intermediaries, such as think tanks and advocacy organizations, are also important, as they translate and present research that is already produced by others (Tseng, 2012, p. 5). Administrators and program managers at mid-level are also vital. They influence practices and develop program changes. In addition, they are also poised to promote institutionalization of research as they have longer tenure than leaders who frequently rotate out of positions (Tseng, 2012, p. 5). These are often-forgotten cogs in the wheel, so to speak.

**Unpacking varying conceptualizations of research.** Language differences between researchers and consumers obstructs research usage. Even more important, different people in different roles may define research differently. Knowing what research means for stakeholders and why they embrace such meanings is vital for unpacking how research is used. Some may define research broadly, as empirical findings, personal experiences, data, and feedback. Other definitions may be more narrow and technical and comprise results that are derived from “systematic, objective and rigorous procedures applied to obtain valid and reliable knowledge” relevant to the program (Tseng, 2012, p. 6).

**How we take research in.** Research may also be acquired by stakeholder users in various ways. Many interested in research utilization tend to focus on how to push documents out (Dearing and Kreuter, 2010). Also relevant, however, is the process of how stakeholders and consumers take research in. This requires questions around how stakeholders and consumers get information, what sources they trust the most, and what relationships are important for like-minded stakeholders engaging in problem-solving and information seeking.

**Research interpretation.** Consumers of research must always interpret results. In the absence of interpretation, research has little meaning and no real application to practice or policy. Research is sorted, examined, and interpreted (Kennedy, 1984). Only then does research have ramifications and implications for policy or programming. Different consumers interpret research dependent on the norms and purpose of their profession, training, existing knowledge, and how they intend to use research evidence and whether the research is actionable and/or challenges the conventional wisdom. Research interpretation may include the understanding and articulation of figures but also the extent to which research is credible and of quality (Tseng, 2012). Whatever the appraisal, researchers and

stakeholder consumers may use different criteria for interpreting data and making judgements about its quality. It is beneficial for research producers to be aware of interpretation differences.

**Research use.** Researchers may seek to produce research for instrumental use, where findings are used to guide or influence decisions. However, stakeholder consumers may avoid research that could be used for more political goals, if it means research may be used to justify political decisions. Research can also be requested or commissioned to back a decision or policy, in which case findings are more symbolic and used tactically. Research may also be conceptual or cognitive, used to shape ideas around an issue.<sup>10</sup> Awareness of these uses are essential for utilization, as users need to understand how findings might relate to these categories and ultimately their own goals for the research.

**Organizational capacity.** Facilitating effective research utilization must also consider how broader organizational forces influence participants in the process (Moynihan & Landuyt, 2009). Specifically, organizations may have a tradition of using research or may not. Similarly, staff may or may not have the time or expertise to use research. Institutions that are more bureaucratic may also be resistant to research and instead opt for standard routines and procedures that have worked in the past. Leadership may also not be supportive of using research or have very different ideas of what research is.

A perennial problem is budget. Application of research findings may be delayed or prevented if the budget is not sufficient.

**Trusted relationships as sources of information.** Relationships of trust are important, as research consumers draw on sources deemed reliable and credible for information (Tseng, 2012). Various actors that are part of the process may be important for practitioners and policymakers as they try to make sense of research. Researchers may not be aware of these relationships, leaving trusted sources out of the research utilization process.

**Political and policy context.** Practitioners and policymakers do not work in a vacuum. A challenge for researchers lies with understanding the political context in which research is obtained, interpreted, and used.

### **Applying the Research Utilization Process: Vignettes on Pathways to Women's Empowerment**

Stakeholders in this convening may appreciate these challenges through participation in a vignette exercise. Vignettes are a useful lens through which research utilization may be understood.

Vignettes, often referred to as case studies, illustrate and highlight in-depth, specific, and complex dynamics and processes by examining a case or example within its actual context. Case studies are valuable for addressing focused, descriptive questions of *what* happened and more explanatory queries of *how* or *why* phenomena occurred. The current vignettes describe the dynamics of programs in sectors that are essential for advancing women's empowerment: entrepreneurship, digital technology, education, and health.

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<sup>10</sup> More specifically, instrumental research utilization refers to concrete, direct application of the information; conceptual or cognitive use refers to research that changes the way someone thinks about an issue; and symbolic use is usually strategic and is used to support or legitimize a policy or decision. Stetler, CB. (2001). Updating the Stetler Model of research utilization to facilitate evidence-based practice. *Nursing Outlook*, 49(6), 272-279.

Though each of the four focus areas is relevant in and of itself to empowerment, they are far from mutually exclusive, as the vignettes illustrate. Given the sectors' saliency to women's empowerment, international development program activity in these areas is robust. Each has substantial and enduring potential to be transformative for women's empowerment politically, economically, and socially and for advancing the development landscape.

### **Vignette I. “Beyond Corporate Social Responsibility: Using Research to Advance Women’s Empowerment through Entrepreneurship” by Angela Walker**

**The Problem Set:** The vignette by Angela Walker explains that globally, there are approximately 224 million women entrepreneurs who participate in the ownership of nearly 35 percent of privately owned firms in the formal economy. Women account for over \$20 trillion in spending per year and are involved in over 80 percent of consumer purchasing decisions worldwide. Women drive economies as business leaders, employees, consumers, and entrepreneurs. According to Woetzel (2015), if women participated in the economy as fully as men globally, they would add \$28 trillion or 26 percent to the annual world gross domestic products (GDP). And yet, women-owned businesses earn less than 1 percent of the money spent on vendors by large corporations and governments.

**Utilizing Research—Solutions for Advancing Women’s Empowerment through Entrepreneurism:** WEConnect and World Bank programming targeting women-owned businesses (WOBs) in Bangladesh seeks to create linkages and align private sector corporate buyers with women-owned businesses through creating markets that will enable local and multinational corporations to procure goods and services from WOBs while diversifying their value chains. The project engages Bangladeshi women’s business associations and national business platforms to grow women-owned businesses and ultimately generate economic growth in Bangladesh.

Qualitative research, which comprised focus groups, in-depth interviews, and desk research, finds that women owners face obstacles that men do not. As in other countries, access to capital, loans, licenses, and insurance may be difficult. Norms are also prohibitive: business is not considered an acceptable profession for women in Bangladesh, and women are discouraged by their husbands from participating in business activities. Corporations find it difficult to find individual WOBs because they are affiliated with associations.

Walker concludes that government initiatives have not been widely effective for growing WOBs, while formal banking institutions do not prioritize women. Civil society advocacy emphasizes small, cottage industries, rather than formal small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Based on the research, a number of recommendations include providing: a) corporate supply-chain and procurement professionals with more evidence to support the business case for buying from WOBs; b) capacity-building programs for WOBs provided by corporations and professionals to help them describe their value-add; c) mentorship programs between WOB owners and successful women entrepreneurs; and d) government interventions, such as sourcing policies that make it easier for WOBs to bid for government contracts.

For most of the vignettes, research indicates that normative frameworks and lack of government prioritization are impediments to women’s advancement in health innovation, digital technology, and entrepreneurship. Research-based recommendations converge on the importance of government initiatives and regulations that are supportive of women. Legal frameworks and national plans or strategies can help promote and protect opportunities for women as well as institutionalize gains. In the vignettes on digital technology and entrepreneurship, capacity-building for women looms large, research suggests.



## **Vignette 2. “Beyond the Gender Digital Divide: Utilizing Research to Transform the Impact of Digital Technology for Women” by Dr. Revi Sterling**

Digital technologies can enhance women’s participation in economic—and public life more generally—as well as boost their social and financial autonomy.<sup>11</sup> Access and use of information communication technologies (ICTs) allow women to circumvent normative barriers to mobility and access to information. Enabled by ICTs, women can work flexibly and from a distance, interact with clients and customers, and enhance their financial autonomy. As Dr. Revi Sterling’s vignette on women’s access to advances in ICTs explains, access to technology and thus information is gendered, as men are 50 percent more likely to have access to the internet and have greater access to mobile phones as well, in addition to mobile money and bank accounts. Women’s connectedness to the information, communication, and technology, however, is linked to education. Illiteracy is widespread among women in emerging countries—and wider still among rural women.

**The Problem Set:** Norms are impediments to women’s access to ICTs, including internet access, encrypted technologies, and technologies that enhance financial autonomy. Norms cut women off from information, prevent autonomous decision-making, and prevent their inclusion in various sectors. As such, norms need to be addressed in international development programming.

Despite the gravity of the issue, development programs have been largely unsuccessful at doing so, and literature on gender and technology is very limited. Lack of education and digital illiteracy among women, coupled with the low levels of empowerment and agency, require creative ways to test the usability of interventions.

**Utilizing Research—Solutions for Advancing Women’s Empowerment in the Digital/Technology Sector:** Research reveals several areas of research focus that could improve women’s access to digital technology. Findings suggest that effective interventions should address advances in voice-, gesture-, and other text-free user interfaces to engage women and increase technology uptake. However, addressing low confidence is needed before putting a device in front of someone who believes they lack the knowledge to use it. Online internet services, rent-to-own models, and other ICT onramps that realistically fit women’s lives and program objectives must also be prioritized. User-level education on how to avoid online harassment, scams, and fake news might also be provided and integrated into software and hardware.

## **Vignette 3. “Women’s Empowerment and Education: How Do We Empower the Displaced Millions?” by Dr. Faheem Hussain**

Education is linked to women’s economic, political, and social empowerment, as education enables improved access to economic opportunities, such as participation in the workforce; leads to enhanced income; and facilitates understanding of their rights in a manner that enhances inclusion and reduces poverty. Still, significant gender gaps exist in access, learning, and continuing education in many regions of the world. Approximately 16 million girls will not enter a classroom, and women account for 60 percent of the 750 million adults who lack basic literacy skills (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019).

**The Problem Set:** The benefit of education for women also extends to other areas. For example, education decreases women’s risk to extremism and contributes to more effective solution for environmental degradation, according to the vignette offered by Dr. Faheem Hussain. Massive human

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<sup>11</sup>Empowering Women in the Digital Age at [https://www.g20-insights.org/policy\\_briefs/empowering-women-digital-age/](https://www.g20-insights.org/policy_briefs/empowering-women-digital-age/)

displacement globally, however, challenges the conventional wisdom about women and education, particularly as it relates to refugee and displaced populations, creating a dilemma, Hussain explains. Most research on women's education assumes that populations are static and "do not move." Research on women refugees' access to education among this vulnerable and growing population does not take this movement into consideration and is often wholly inadequate when it does. Little is known about the core challenges of refugee women and girls in accessing long-term education, and there is a dearth of evidenced-based research on what works in conflict-settings where more refugees and displaced persons dwell.

### **Utilizing Research—Solutions for Advancing Women's Empowerment through**

**Strengthening Education Research among Displaced Populations:** The crisis facing Rohingya refugees in Myanmar is an interesting case in point for learning how research can improve the lives of displaced women. Rohingya women and girls lack access to education due to barriers of patriarchy that are perpetuated among refugee and displaced populations. In their temporary settings—countries such as Jordan and Chad—education systems also disadvantage women. In-depth, participatory, and interdisciplinary research will advance the unique and complex challenges refugee and displaced women face, the case study asserts. This would also inform policy formulation and implementation processes in contexts of transnational as well as regional, national, and local jurisdictions.

### **Vignette 4. "Statistics and Political Power in Health Innovation for Women" by Dr. Dani Poole**

Disparities in access to women's education also limit their ability to control decisions related to their health. Improving women's empowerment is critical for women's basic care and wellness. For example, 100,000 women could be saved from maternal death annually if they had access to proper resources (WHO, 2019). The health care needs of women and lack of resources to pay for care are related to the gender inequities around health. In turn, women's limited education, the weak legal frameworks that protect women, and gender-based violence reinforce and perpetuate poverty and gender inequity. The worldwide HIV/AIDS rates offer a sobering case in point: half of those affected by HIV/AIDS globally are women and girls.<sup>12</sup> Innovations in women's health could further the well-being of women in both developed and developing countries.

**The Problem Set:** Dr. Dani Poole's vignette argues that scientific inquiry related to innovations in women's health is "underpowered" in terms of women's invisibility in research statistics and political power. The vignette underscores the need to study health disparities in order to advance innovation in health care for women. However, there is a wide chasm between what we expect to see in terms of the effects of health care innovations and what innovations actually bring. Proper disaggregation of sex and gender data is often missing, as research fails to include sex and gender disaggregation that would elucidate the success or failure of innovations. Women are also excluded from research altogether. Poole notes that women are underrepresented in clinical trials in cardiovascular disease (Melloni *et al.*, 2010) and cancer (Kwiatkowski *et al.*, 2013—the leading causes of death among women in the United States. Among studies that include women, the influence of sex or gender is not widely nor rigorously analyzed. Women are often excluded from health studies, likely due to cultural, linguistic, and economic factors. Politics, however, also loom large, according to Poole.

### **Utilizing Research—Solutions for Advancing Women's Empowerment through**

**Strengthening Health Research:** Intersectional and multi-sectoral approaches will advance more women-inclusive health agendas globally. This could be accomplished by funder requirements as part of

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<sup>12</sup> Partners in Health at <https://www.pih.org/article/women-still-face-big-gaps-in-access-to-health-care>

evidence-based research, policymakers can launch initiatives that mandate statistical representation of women in research, and researchers can develop methods that analyze barriers to women's participation. USAID, for example, calls for gender-sensitive approaches in its development programming and research.

## **Best Practices in Research Utilization**

Research utilization models consider both the supply and demand side of research utilization, from the perspectives of researchers and research users (Stetler, 2001; Tseng, 2012; The Population Council, 2016; FHI 360, 2019). Supply-side variables often include the researcher production of materials, dissemination, and the production of the research itself, while the demand side, by contrast, looks more to factors that determine consumer use of research, such as the type of research methodology, the extent to which research aligns with organizational goals, consumer perceptions of research's value, and how professional roles may influence such perceptions.

### **Phase I. Preparation**

**Understand the policy and political environment in which the research is used.** According to Nesbit and Scheufele (2009), “No matter how accurately communicated and understood the science, policy decisions cannot be separated from values political contexts and the necessary tradeoffs between costs, benefits and risks” (p. 1,768). Here, local, regional, or national politics is a necessary backdrop of research utilization. Good practice, rather than eschewing politics, pragmatically embraces efforts to understanding how the politics and advocacy at various levels may shape the conditions of research utilization (international or bilateral donor positions, political party politics, regulatory environments, conflict and instability). Other contextual factors may also influence research utilization, such as sentiment toward foreign donors, conflict, and historic or normative barriers. These may also present opportunities, however.

**Recognize the organizational capacity and organizational culture of research user institutions.** Organizational norms and values may or may not be amenable to research. It is important, therefore, to consider the extent to which organizations are receptive to research, are able to apply the findings, and are able to realistically scale-up programming based on the research findings and recommendations given organization budget, staff, and system/infrastructure constraints.

**Identify stakeholders in key sectors but also at critical levels across levels and within organizations.** Bringing stakeholder users together is vital (The Population Council, 2016). Stakeholder individuals and institutions at the local, regional, national, or international levels may be relevant in total or in part. Moreover, the landscape of users is more likely comprised of not just one or two lead representatives but individuals at various levels, from management who make decisions regarding which research recommendations to implement to the level of the program officer who is ultimately responsible for implementing actions based on research.

**Be familiar with how stakeholder users define, acquire, use, and interpret research.** Focus groups and in-depth interviews can provide useful information. Stakeholder users, for instance, may use research for instrumental, conceptual, or symbolic reasons.

**Know the project and justify the research** (FHI 360, 2019). This includes:

- Digesting background materials to understand: a) the impetus for the research; b) the need for the research; c) expected research uses; d) target populations; and e) the potential research impact

- Illustrating what research/research approaches have worked well, which have not, and why to make a strong case for the research so it is distinguished from previous studies
- Articulating why the research is important to test/study the intervention
- Determining whether there is a need or desire to include intervention financing information and related data collection. Costs for implementing research recommendations and scaling up interventions are important. Research recommendations might discuss costs and financing estimates.

**Stakeholder engagement.** Stakeholders who are identified as essential research users should be engaged from the beginning of the process from the point of study design and data collection to developing findings/recommendation and dissemination (The Population Council, 2016).

**Phase II. Research Production:** Research production phase focuses on conceptualization of the research (Tseng, 2012; FHI 360, 2019):

- Design the study.
- Be clear in defining whether your research can actually reliably measure “program impact” versus “program influence.”
- Implement the study.
- Ensure that research evidence is credible and applicable.
- Analyze, compile, and present the research results.
- Consider that all findings/recommendations or recommended interventions may not be feasibly adopted in their entirety. Some may be too large-scale for an organization.
- Note that costs for implementing research recommendations and scale-up may be important. If possible, research recommendations should discuss costs and financing and ways to reduce costs. The choice to include cost information and related data collection should be determined at the research design phase.

**Phase III. Research Translation and Dissemination:** Determine what type of research product is most suitable and useful for conveying information:

- Decide whether the research findings will take the form of reporting, technical assistance; policy advice; capacity building; foreign exchanges, etc. (FHI 360, 2019).
- Select and format research materials in a manner suited to stakeholder preferences for easy utilization (reports, summaries, databases).
- Avoid jargon.
- In addition to reports, consider other forms of dissemination to promote utilization, such as publishing in scholarly journals, joining advocacy networks, and holding one-on-one meetings (Walugembe *et al.*, 2015).
- Be mindful and clear as to whether the research is instrumental, symbolic, or conceptual (Stetler, 2001).
- Present generalizations and findings logically. Specify “how-to,” and explain the implications to address “so what?” (Stetler, 2001).
- The level of use should be clear, outlining whether the research findings are targeted for individuals, organizations, or groups (Stetler, 2001).
- Use charts and graphic parsimoniously and strategically. Graphics, while attractive and good for condensing complex information, can also be difficult to interpret.

**Phase IV. Whether and What to Adopt Findings:** The user has to decide whether to use the research findings and which findings to use. Findings can be grouped according to similarities or differences, or issues:

- Stakeholder users may decide to use the research based on whether the research findings are instrumental, symbolic, or conceptual.
- After the research is presented, stakeholder users may consider whether more internal information may be needed before acting on the evidence. Use may be delayed if more information or research is needed (FHI 360, 2019).
- To enhance research credibility and utilization, consider stakeholder validation meetings.
- Use the finding in program implementation or for research, or decline to use or apply the findings.

**Institutionalizing Results through Continued Action:** Actions based on research findings may continue and can become a permanent practice (FHI 360, 2019). This institutionalizes program outcomes and advances sustainability:

- Research may be used in the future through scaling up and program expansion to other beneficiaries or countries (FHI 360, 2019).
- If needed, financing can be obtained to maintain new actions.
- Future research can include impact and performance evaluation to rigorously monitor effects and make adjustments accordingly.

Research utilization models tend to be sector- or program-specific. Toolkits designed by implementers working in international development provide additional helpful strategies and approaches that are applicable to women's empowerment activities.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

Perhaps one of the most important takeaways from this paper is the need to consider both the supply side and demand sides of research utilization, from the perspective of the research producer and user stakeholders and consumers. The vignettes around women's empowerment underscore the extent to which the research utilization ecosystem is rich—but also very diverse and complex. Its participants have differing views of research and thus may use research in different ways. Relationships, judgements about the credibility of research, time, resources, organizational culture, professional norms, and personal views are all variables that fit into the equation of effective research utilization. This realization will hopefully compel researchers and stakeholders to consider all of these as they attempt to harmonize research and research goals.

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<sup>13</sup> See Population Council. (2016). Project SOAR's approach to research utilization. Washington, D.C.: Population Council. See also: FHI 360. FHI 360 utilization toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www.fhi360.org/expertise/research-utilization>.

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## APPENDIX A: CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE CASE STUDY

### **Corporal Punishment as GBV: Evidence of What Works for Reducing CP and Empowering Girls in Uganda**

**Corporal punishment in schools is a widely normalized but contested form of gender-based violence (GBV).** Corporal punishment is the most widely reported yet accepted form of school violence. It is gendered in its risk and protective factors, processes, and outcomes. Specifically, corporal punishment (re)produces inequitable gender norms in schools, homes, and communities and contributes to perpetuating structural gender inequality through its links with school dropout, low educational attainment, and negative mental and physical health and child development. Corporal punishment at school against girls, in particular, heightens risks of cumulative effects on education, health, and developmental outcomes, as many girls face multiple forms of violence—psychological, physical, and sexual, often disproportionately (Devries, *et al.*, 2013). Though boys may be beaten more severely than girls, corporal punishment may be based on norms of hyper-masculinity and stoicism. Across low-income countries, more girls than boys report exposure to corporal punishment in available nationwide representative survey results. Corporal punishment affects bodies, relationships, learning, and voice, and such obstacles to agency and participation—either as a result of lack of education, self-esteem, and thus access to opportunity—stymie women’s and girls’ empowerment.

**Existing literature reveals no scientific evidence of positive effects of corporal punishment on children’s educational attainment, health, or development.** Available rigorous evidence globally reveals negative effects of corporal punishment on child behavioral regulation, cognitive development, mental and physical health, and educational outcomes.

**Evaluation results from interventions in schools in low-income countries show that corporal punishment can be prevented.** Positive discipline alternatives, supportive teacher-student relationships and safe school culture, reduce learners’ risks of poor academic performance, dropout, mental and physical health problems, and delayed cognitive development, according to the Good School Study in Uganda using random control trials (BMC Public Health). Programs need to be integrated into school systems and resourced appropriately for sustainability. Definitional framing of corporal punishment as violence improves measures to evaluate students’ exposure to it. Attitudes, however, serve as unreliable proxies for behavior change. Teachers’ self-reported behaviors concerning corporal punishment must be triangulated with learners’ reports of violence exposure at school, as children’s reports often contradict those of teachers. Social Behavior Change Communications interventions show gains in near-term attitude change, but strong evidence of behavior change remains elusive without long-term, reflective dialogue on child rights and safe school culture, and improved evaluation measures. Qualitative investigation into change pathways to reducing corporal punishment show the importance of improved teacher-student relationships, with less fear and improved student voice in school matters, positive discipline methods, rewards and praise. **Other studies using impact and performance evaluation, such as the NORC Literacy and Retention Activity (LARA) intervention study, find that behavior change in corporal punishment and new non-violent discipline methods improve reading skills and retention in primary grades.**

**Results suggest that whole-of-school, whole-of-community, multi-sectoral approaches should combine to prevent corporal punishment as GBV.** All forms of GBV in schools, homes, and communities must be prevented concurrently to see mutually reinforcing benefits of



educational attainment and healthy child development. Intervention development through co-design with partners for school, home, and community can maximize outcomes. Longer-term social norm change is required for cultivating safe, supportive, stable, and nurturing schools, homes, and communities that value girls and boys equally and do not practice corporal punishment, but instead use alternative positive discipline methods. Multi-sectoral collaboration is also needed, with health expertise on GBV prevention in education-sector interventions.