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The SWPER index for women's empowerment in Africa: development and validation of an index based on survey data

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: The Sustainable Development Goals strongly focus on equity. Goal 5 explicitly aims to empower all women and girls, reinforcing the need to have a reliable indicator to track progress. Our objective was to develop a novel women's empowerment indicator from widely available data sources, broadening opportunities for monitoring and research on women's empowerment. METHODS: We used Demographic and Health Survey data from 34 African countries, targeting currently partnered women. We identified items related to women's empowerment present in most surveys, and used principal component analysis to extract the components. We carried out a convergent validation process using coverage of three health interventions as outcomes; and an external validation process by analysing correlations with the Gender Development Index. FINDINGS: 15 items related to women's empowerment were selected. We retained three components (50% of total variation) which, after rotation, were identified as three dimensions of empowerment: attitude to violence, social independence, and decision making. All dimensions had moderate to high correlation with the Gender Development Index. Social independence was associated with higher coverage of maternal and child interventions; attitude to violence and decision making were more consistently associated with the use of modern contraception. INTERPRETATION: The index, named Survey-based Women's emPowERment index (SWPER), has potential to widen the research on women's empowerment and to give a better estimate of its effect on health interventions and outcomes. It allows within-country and between-country comparison, as well as time trend analysis, which no other survey-based index provides. FUNDING: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Keywords: women's empowerment, empowerment index, Sustainable Development Goal 5, Gender Development Index, so

Full text

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