



A resource for scientists and research teams

Photo: Anuprita Shukla.

LADDER OF POWER AND FREEDOM:

Qualitative data collection tool to understand local perceptions of agency and decision making¹

Introduction

The Ladder of Power and Freedom module is a qualitative data collection tool designed to provide **numerical and narrative data** on perceptions of the **capacities of local men and women to exercise agency and make major decisions in their lives**. The focus group module features four questions and two interactive ranking exercises for either focus group or semi-structured interview instruments.

Purpose of method

The purpose of the tool is to provide **meaningful contextual and comparative evidence** of local men's and women's own assessments and interpretations of the levels of **agency** in their lives, and the key factors and processes that they perceive to shape their capacities for making important decisions. Agency refers to the capacity to make important decisions in one's life and act upon them. Measures of agency are central to understanding processes of empowerment and social, political, and economic change both locally and more broadly.²

The Ladder data has research and practical applications, including:

- multidimensional evidence on agency and local gender norms, and how they are interacting to shape gender roles and relations, access to opportunities, and perceptions of wellbeing in a given social context;
- comparative qualitative measures of agency that remain contextually grounded;
- dynamic findings which can contribute to longitudinal research, or to interpretations of quantitative measures of agency and empowerment in mixed-methods approaches; and
- contextual and comparative evidence which can inform programmatic and M&E needs of relevance to more inclusive and effective agricultural innovation and wider development processes in an intervention area.

¹ This resource builds on Petesch, P., Badstue, L., Prain, G. (2018). Gender norms, agency, and innovation in agriculture and natural resource management: The GENNOVATE methodology. Mexico, D. F.: CIMMYT. Available at: http://42q77i2rw7d03mfrd11pvzz.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/GENNOVATE-Methodology_Feb2018_FINAL.pdf The guide discusses additional quality measures not addressed here, such as translation and consistent application of the tool by the field team.

² For useful general discussion of agency, see Amartya Sen's (1985) Well-being, agency and freedom: The Dewey lectures 1984. *Journal of Philosophy*, 82(4), 169-221; and for gender dimensions in assessments of agency, see Naila Kabbeer's (1999) Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435-464.

When paired with other contextual evidence, the data provides a strategic entry point for rigorous **assessment of agency in a local social context** and whether it is supportive of women's and men's abilities to innovate in their livelihoods and the sense of agency and wellbeing that local people are deriving from such initiatives. The **comparative evidence can inform medium-term outcome measures of agency** that address concerns for gender equality, agricultural innovation, development, and wellbeing in rural communities.

Applying the tool

The Ladder of Power and Freedom activity centers on a ladder visual which depicts different levels of agency, ranging from having little power and freedom on step 1 to having power and freedom to make most major decisions on step 5. The tool also explores study participants' perceptions of whether and how agency and decision-making processes have changed over time and the reasons for these changes.

The field research needs for effective application of the tool are highlighted, followed by the modules for focus groups and for individual interviews. This tool concludes with an illustration of the data generated by a focus group and selected resources with analysis of Ladder of Power and Freedom data.

Sensitive human subject data. The module generates potentially sensitive information, and it is recommended that i) study participants receive assurances that their testimonies will be provided anonymously; and ii) data collection is conducted in a private room without the presence of any members of the opposite sex (including in the field team).

Field team composition and training.

When used with focus groups, facilitators and notetakers should be of the same sex as participants. Notetakers will be responsible for complete narrative and numerical documentation of the field notes. A practical field training for the team is required to ensure common understanding of the tool and correct application of the data collection and documentation procedures.

Selection of focus group members. The tool was designed for sampling frames in which the community is the unit of analysis. In each community, data collection should be carried out with sex-specific focus groups of eight to 10 members. Since the tool requires respondents to recall community circumstances 10 years ago, the minimum age recommended is 25 years old. The tool can be adapted, however, for different sampling frames and population groups. For example, the 10-year recall section may be dropped if youth are sampled. Other good practices for focus group selection apply, such as ensuring that focus group members share similar social group characteristics and are drawn from different segments of the community (e.g., to capture the diversity of the local ethno-religious groups and associational life rather than members of the same family, political, or economic networks).

Photo: Anuprita Shukla.

GENNOVATE fieldwork:
 Poor men's focus group
 discussion in Bangladesh.





GENNOVATE fieldwork:
Men's focus group
discussion in Kenya.

Photo: Renee Bullock, IITA.

Selection of respondents for semi-structured individual interviews.

We recommend that equal numbers of women and men be included in the sample and that respondents are a minimum of 25 years old if the recall question is retained.

Specifying the geographic area.

The tool requires study participants to consider the men and women of their own community, and it will be important to ensure there is a common understanding among the study participants of the geographic area covered by their community. Is it the physical living area like the village? A particular hamlet of the village?

Helping study participants to recall the past.

The tool requires study participants to reflect on their lives a decade ago. To assist with recall, it will be important to substitute "10 years

ago" where this is mentioned in the module with a fixed reference year (e.g., 2007 or 2008) and to reference an important event at that time. The year chosen should be roughly a decade ago and stand out in most local people's minds because of a particularly important event in their country or community. This might be a natural disaster, a change of government, the end of a conflict, an epidemic, the completion of a major infrastructure project (e.g., a road), or some other major event that will help people place themselves back in time. If there is not a compelling national event, then a local one can work well (e.g., in 2009 when the high school first opened).

Facilitating the tool in a focus group.

The tool substitutes the notions of "power and freedom" for the term agency, and facilitators ask focus groups members to consider the extent

to which the majority of the men in their community (if a men's focus group) or the majority of local women (if a women's group) have the capacity to make their own decisions about important affairs in their life, such as "where they will work or whether they will start or end a relationship with the opposite sex." To prepare for the focus group, the facilitator should create a visual of a five-step ladder on a flipchart. The facilitator will explain to the focus group that step 5, the top step, indicates great power and freedom, whereas step 1 signifies very little power and freedom to make these consequential decisions. Facilitators then request each focus group participant to privately vote on a small sticky note for the step where they think most of the community members of their gender occupy. The facilitator then: i) collects the notes/rankings, ii) posts the numerical findings next to

each ladder step, iii) summarizes the pattern of ratings for the group, and iv) facilitates a discussion on reasons for the steps identified.

It will be important for the facilitator to probe deeply into the focus group members' explanations of their ladder rankings and to elicit a multidimensional and inclusive discussion of the reasons for the rankings identified.

The rankings and discussion are then repeated to capture perceptions of power and freedom a decade ago. *These discussions should also be probed deeply to elicit detailed explanations for the trends in agency identified.* The goal of the exercise is to understand the factors that shape women's or men's conceptions of power and freedom in their lives, and reasons for changes in these conceptions over time, rather than obtaining exact measurements or absolute values for agency.

The same procedures can be applied in a **semi-structured individual interview** instrument, but the informants consider their own agency rather than those of community members.

Modules for focus groups and interviews. It is recommended that the Ladder of Power and Freedom module be the first topic in a focus group or interview. This is because agency is a very multidimensional topic, and any previous topics discussed would likely influence a general assessment of agency by study participants. As discussed above, also ensure that study participants share a common understanding of the geographic area covered by the community. Below are the semi-structured questions applied during the original GENNOVATE fieldwork from 2014 to 2016.

Focus group module

Q1. Please imagine a five-step ladder *[show figure of ladder]*, where at the bottom, on the first step, stand the individual **[sex of FGD]** of this community with little capacity to make their own decisions about important affairs in their lives. These **[sex of FGD]** have little to say about if or where they will work, or about starting or ending a relationship with a **[opposite sex]**. On the highest step, the fifth, stand those who have great capacity to make important decisions for themselves, including about their working life and whether to start or end a relationship in their personal life.

On which step of this ladder would you position the majority of the **[sex of FGD]** in the village today? *[The ratings should be done individually in private by the FGD members.]*

Ladder of Power and Freedom

Step 5: Power & freedom to make most all major life decisions

Step 4: Power & freedom to make many major life decisions

Step 3: Power & freedom to make some major life decisions

Step 2: Only a small amount of power & freedom

Step 1: Almost no power or freedom to make decisions

[The figure on the flipchart only needs to show the ladder and step #. The narrative in this figure is to help facilitators describe the different steps.]

Q2. Why? Would any of you like to volunteer the reasons for your rating?

Q3. Now please imagine the community 10 years ago, when _____³ happened. On which step of this ladder would you position the majority of the **[sex of FGD]** in the village 10 years ago?

Q4. Why? What has **(or has not)** changed for the **[sex of FGD]** in this community?

³ To aid people's recalls, be sure to substitute a fixed year for "10 years ago" and to mention an important national or local event, such as an election or major weather event from that year.

Semi-structured individual interview module

Q1. Please imagine a five-step ladder *[show figure of ladder]*, where at the bottom, on the first step, stand individual **[sex of respondent]** of the community with little capacity to make their own decisions about important affairs in their lives. These **[sex of FGD]** have little to say about if or where they will work, starting or ending a relationship with a **[opposite sex]**, or starting a new agricultural or other business.

Ladder of Power and Freedom

Step 5: Power & freedom to make most all major life decisions

Step 4: Power & freedom to make many major life decisions

Step 3: Power & freedom to make some major life decisions

Step 2: Only a small amount of power & freedom

Step 1: Almost no power or freedom to make decisions

[The figure on the flipchart only needs to show the ladder and step #. The narrative in this figure is to help facilitators describe the different steps.]

On the highest step, the fifth, stand those who have great capacity to make important decisions for themselves, including about their working life and whether to start or end a relationship in their personal life.

1a. On which step of this ladder would you position yourself today?

1b. And 10 years ago? -----

Q2. What do you think are the main reasons why your rating *(increased/stayed the same/decreased)*?

Illustration of focus group data generated

Table 1. Highlights indicate the most frequently selected step to represent the ladder position of the majority of local women (if a woman's FGD) or local men (if a men's FGD). One women's and one men's middle-class focus groups, Amatuma,* Kenya, GENNOVATE dataset.

Ladder Step	Women's focus group		Men's focus group	
	Rankings now	10 years ago	Rankings now	10 years ago
5	0	0	0	0
4	2	1	1	3
3	6	1	6	4
2	2	6	3	3
1	0	2	0	0
Mean step**	3.0	2.1	2.8	3.0

*A pseudonym. **Change in perceived agency = mean step now – mean step 10 years ago.

Fieldnotes from middle-class women's focus group: Amatuma, Kenya, GENNOVATE dataset

Facilitator:

Q2: Why? Would any of you like to volunteer the reasons for your rating [in the current period]?

Participant 4: "In my view, women are on step 3 because of poverty which limits their decision making."

Participant 9: "I also support step 3 because sometimes women feel they have the power to make the decisions, but when they start a

project they get stuck and need the support of the family to succeed."

Participant 2: "Like Gladys says, sometimes women start a group like a merry-go-round but can only stand when other women support them."

Participant 3: "In this village I think women are limited in decision making because they do not have the knowledge."

Participant 6: "Funds are also limited in that women do not have the financial support for expert farming techniques that can help them eradicate challenges like the rodents which eat up the produce."

Participant 8: "You know most women do not have people to train us on crop farming like cassava for best results."

Participant 3: "I also feel ignorance contributes because people do not want to apply techniques like crop rotation and mixed farming. In this case you find that people over-rely on maize for food, which poses dangers in food security. In marriage there are hindrances too because when a woman has an idea, the man opposes them, so they can't get started."

Participant 4: "There is also less land in the area, so not much production."

Participant 7: "Women also get stuck because they do not have the motivation to progress, so they remain in a dilemma concerning where to start."



GENNOVATE fieldwork: Women's focus group discussion in Kenya.

Photo: Anuprita Shukla



GENNOVATE fieldwork:
Young women's focus group
discussion in Bangladesh.

Selected literature with Ladder of Power and Freedom analysis

1. Petesch, P., Badstue, L., Williams, G., Farnworth, C. & Umantseva, A. (2017). [Gender and innovation processes in maize-based systems. GENNOVATE Report to the CGIAR Research Program on Maize.](#) GENNOVATE Research Paper. Mexico, D. F.: CIMMYT, 8-11.
2. Badstue, L., Petesch, P., Williams, G., & Umantseva, A., with Daniela Moctezuma. (2017). [Gender and innovation processes in wheat-based systems. GENNOVATE Report to the CGIAR Research Program on Wheat.](#) GENNOVATE Research Paper. Mexico, D. F.: CIMMYT.
3. Petesch, P., Bullock, R., Feldman, S., Badstue, L., Rietveld, A., Bauchspies, W., Kamanzi, A., Tegbaru, A., & Yila, J. (Forthcoming). Normative dimensions of agency and agricultural decision making in Sub-Saharan Africa, GENNOVATE Special Issue. Submitted to Journal of Gender, Agriculture and Food Security.
4. The Ladder of Power and Freedom tool draws on the World Bank's *On Norms and Agency* global study. In this version, focus group members construct their own detailed Ladder of Power and Freedom, with each step depicting the varied traits that they associate with their own gender at that ladder step. For analysis with this data, see Muñoz Boudet, A.M., Petesch, P. & Turk, C., with Thumala, A. (2013). [On norms and agency: Conversations about gender equality with women and men in 20 countries.](#) World Bank: Washington, DC, 131-160.

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To learn more visit:

gender.cgiar.org/collaborative-research/gennovate/

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