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Women Empowerment and Microfinance

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ABSTRACT

The traditional view in development has been that reductions in overall poverty result in lowering gender-based inequalities. This is also the view most often associated with institutions such as the World Bank. In India, gender inequalities are made worse by income inequalities, so that while school participation rates for boys and girls are roughly the same for the top income quintile, the gender gap rises to nearly 5 years for the lowest income quintile (WorldBank, 2011). Empowerment is a complex topic for there is no real agreement on its exact relationship with overall economic development or even how it should be defined and measured. There are several pros and cons associated with increasing women's economic participation through microcredit schemes.

***Keywords* :—** Women, empowerment, poverty, gender inequality, informal economy, microfinance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Research shows that the informal economy constitutes the poorest section of society, made even weaker by the contractual and variable nature of this type of employment. These jobs do not provide health and safety legislation, nor is there any type of risk protection, such as insurance or pension benefits (Bertulfo, 2011) ((ILO), 2013). Women represent the largest component of the informal economy, and for women the informal sector is the primary source of employment (Chen, Jhabvala, & Lund, 2001). For instance, it is estimated that women constitute 80 percent of home-based workers in South Asia (Doanne, 2007). Figure 1 describes the relationship between poverty, vulnerability and gender within the informal economy.

Figure 1: Relationship between poverty, vulnerability and gender within the informal economy

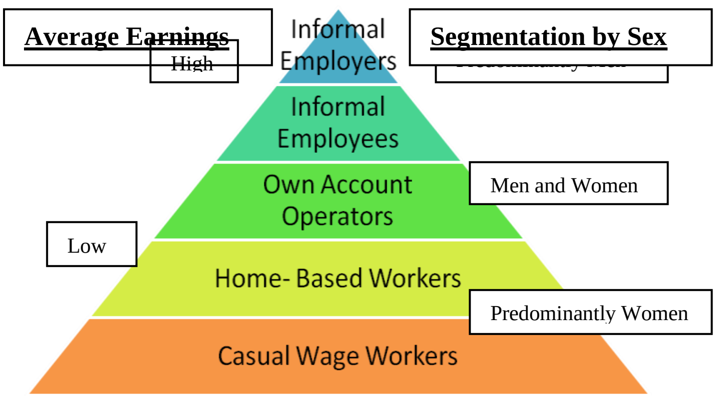

Figure 1 indicates that women dominate the bottom of the pyramid, where earnings are lower and employment conditions most precarious. In addition, much of home-based and casual wage work remains unremunerated. Finally, in comparison with the formal sector, average earnings in the informal sector are lower and the gender-based wage gap higher (Chen, Jhabvala, & Lund, 2001).

Research has always shown that overall economic development plays a major role in reducing gender inequality (WorldBank, 2011). On the flip side, interventions that specifically aim to empower women by improving their access to the constituents of development such as health, education and labor market opportunities, have also shown impact on overall economic development (Duflo, 2012).

The traditional view in development has been that reductions in overall poverty result in lowering gender-based inequalities. This is also the view most often associated with institutions such as the World Bank. For instance, the 2012 World Development Report states that gender gaps in primary education have closed, women's life expectancy has outpaced men's, and over half a billion women have joined the global labor force. The Bank contends that this is a direct result of the economic growth experienced across the global South in the past 30 years. The report goes on to stipulate that economic growth will only reduce inequalities where markets and institutions are well functioning and the winds of change brought on by globalization are allowed to penetrate through traditionally subversive cultural norms (2011), which is a controversial claim as pointed out by several prominent scholars (Bergeron, 2003) (Nussbaum, 2002)

On the other hand, it is hard to dispute that where the incidence of poverty is higher, gender inequality is more pronounced and poor women experience more disempowerment than non-poor women (Moghadam, 2005) (Kabeer, 2005). For instance, female children in Southern countries experience discrimination within the household, but this is usually more pointed when households are poor (Duflo, 2012). Khanna et al (2003) also find that girls are twice as likely to die as boys of diarrhea in the poor neighborhood of New Delhi, India. Similarly, the condition of public schools for girls in the remote areas of Balochistan, Pakistan's poorest province is so decrepit that many parents have stopped sending their daughters to school altogether (Murtuza, 2012).

In India, gender inequalities are made worse by income inequalities, so that while school participation rates for boys and girls are roughly the same for the top income quintile, the gender gap rises to nearly 5 years for the lowest income quintile (WorldBank, 2011). It follows from this discussion that as the incidence of poverty goes down; gender inequality too is likely to improve. This was exactly the experience in India as the country began to experience a boom brought on by information technology jobs outsourced from the West. This boom led to a rise in demand for educated girls, which in turn increased not only the demand for girls' education as parents suddenly saw real benefit from educating their girls, but also reduced the proportion of underweight girls in the area (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011). Similarly, there is evidence that fertility rates decline when the opportunity cost to women's time increases, through the expansion of their economic opportunities (Goldin, 2006) (Jensen, 2010).

But research does suggest that the impact of economic growth on gender inequality tends to vary considerably depending on the type of intervention as well as the measure of inequality used in the analysis. For instance, economic growth resulting from the privatization of public services or export led growth can increase rather than decrease gender inequality (Berik & Rodgers, 2008). Similarly, there is no apparent relationship between growth and empowerment, when empowerment is measured in terms of life expectancy, maternal mortality or participation in economic and political decision-making (UnitedNations, 2009).

Also, despite the rapid economic growth experienced by India and China the problem of missing girls remains huge. In fact, in China the situation has deteriorated overtime, with the female sex ratio worsening from 53 percent of boys to 57 percent of boys among all reported births during the 1990s (WorldBank, 2011).

In the same vein, it is argued that growth-promoting policies can sometimes have a negative impact on women's empowerment because the forces that give rise to affluence are not necessarily gender neutral (Kabeer, 2012). The World Economic Forum's 2011 Global Gender Gap Report states that Saudi Arabia with a per-capita income of $16,423 ranks 131th out of 135 countries, while Ghana with a per capita income of only $1,319 ranks 70th. But turning to the reverse relationship between women's empowerment and development, a growing body of evidence based on field experiments, household surveys, national and cross-national data, indicates that the relationship between empowerment and development is much more robust than the relationship between development and empowerment (UnitedNations, 2009) (Mehra, 1997).

For instance, studies find that educational expansion for women and girls is directly related to higher rates of economic growth, particularly in countries of the South (Klasen, 2002) (Benavot, 1989). Duflo(2012) find that in Indonesian households where women are more highly educated there are likely to be fewer children. They also find that child mortality is positively correlated to the mother's level of education.

In addition, there is a large empirical literature on the differential impacts of income in the hands of women versus men. Broadly speaking these studies show that income and other productive assets controlled by women are associated with larger improvements in child health outcomes, household nutrition and housing (Duflo, 2003; Thomas, 1990) (Thomas, 1993)

All this means that there are multiple pathways through which rising gender equality improves the human capital potential of an economy. This is exactly why microcredit has been considered such an important tool for empowering women. Providing women with access to formal credit is expected to increase their economic opportunities and this, as the World Bank puts it, is "smart economics", that is, not only does it reduce gender-based inequalities it also results in higher levels of economic development. The section below briefly reviews the gendered literature on microfinance.

II. EMPOWERMENT AS AN OUTCOME

Recent studies, however, paint a more complex picture. For instance, Armendariz and Morduch(2010) provide three explanations for the high repayment rates for female borrowers: women have a higher incentive to repay since they have less access to credit and the labor market than men; women are poorer than men which means that their return on capital is higher so the loan is invested more efficiently; and women are less mobileand easier to monitor than men and tend to place more importance on the social sanctions brought on by defaulting on a loan.

These results are corroborated by others who find that high repayment rates by femaleborrowers are not as much a result of their economic independence and success as they are a consequence of their lack of choices (Kabeer, 2001) and the threat of "losing face" in the community (Karim, 2011).

A more recent indicator, used specifically in studies of microcredit in South Asia, is related to control of the loan. There is evidence that a good proportion of women lack control or even knowledge of how the loans taken out in their names are used (Chowdhary M. J., 2009) (Goetz & Gupta, 1994). For instance, Haq and Safavian(2012) find that beween 50 to 70 percent of female borrowers in Pakistan hand their loans over to male relatives. They also find that when existing male borrowers are unable to take out additional loans they force their wives to borrow on their behalf. Bernasek(2003) in her study of Grameen Bank borrowers finds that even when women initially have control over their loans, overtime they may lose that privilege. This implies that when men are intentionally excluded from the benefits of an intervention, especially one where an important resource such as access to finance is concerned, the results will not be as empowering to women as hoped for.

A complicating factor is that women are not a homogenous group (Kabeer, 2001). They play more than one role and enjoy different statuses at different points in their lives (Rogaly, 1996). For instance, if empowerment is measured as female control over the loan, it may appear positive when the mother-in-law of the female borrower assumes control over the loan even though from the point of view of the beneficiary there has been no improvement in status.

On the other hand, Kabeer (2001) argues that the fact that women are more likely to share their loans with the men in their family strengthens the argument for lending to women as the entire family benefits from such a lending arrangement. In contrast, when men are the direct recipients of loans, they can be expected to prevent their wives from having any share in the income generating activities of the household.

But microcredit has also been shown to cause overwork, fatigue, stress and even malnutrition, especially when women's market access does not expand in line with their access to microcredit. This is often because their other household responsibilities do not lessen when they become employed in businesses within and outside their homes (Ackerly, 1995).

Some studies have also looked at patterns of domestic violence in relation to microcredit. Goez and Gupta (1994) find that violence against women can escalate when women either delay or fail to access credit. Other studies from Bangladesh have corroborated this by indicating that there is an associated increase in the incidence of domestic violence among beneficiary households (Ahmed, 2005) (Rahman A. , 2001). But a South African study finds that intimate partner violence reduces by more than half after a two-year microfinance intervention (Kim, et al., 2007).

Using a separate set of outcome-related indicators Pitt, Khandker and Cartwright (2006)find that microcredit programs in Bangladesh provide women with a greater role in household decision-making, increased access to financial resources, expanded social networks, more bargaining power vis-à-vis the husband and greater freedom of mobility. Hashemi, Schuler and Riley (1996) come to a similar conclusion when they compare empowerment-related outcomes from participating and non-participating villages. Ashraf et al (2010) also find that as a result of access to an individually held savings product women's decision-making power increases within the household.

Using a broad range of indicators including income, ownership of assets, education and health related outcomes as well as agency within the household, Zaidi et. al.'s survey (2007) finds that access to microcredit decreases rather than increases women's empowerment in comparison to non-borrowers.

There is, therefore, no consistent message at least from the studies that employ outcome- related indicators, regarding microfinance's impact on women's empowerment.

III. EMPOWERMENT AS A PROCESS

Kabeer(2001) and Garikipati(2011) are right that a study of outcomes without considering the processes that lead to these is meaningless, but their definition of empowerment does not include the lending arrangement itself. Empowerment is usually measured after loan disbursal, but the lending arrangement itself has the potential to affect the processes and outcomes of women's experience with microfinance.

For instance, Agier and Szafarz(2010) in a study on Brazilian microfinance find that while there is no gender-bias in loan denial, women do experience disparate treatment with regard to credit conditions. They find that women's loans are subject to a "glass ceiling" effect and that the gender gap in loan size increases disproportionately with respect to the scale of the borrower's business.

The original lending arrangement promoted by the Grameen Bank and adopted the world over, as a best practices model is group lending. Group lending involves the simultaneous disbursement and collection of loans from a group of borrowers, usually women, who belong to the same community. Since the loan is un-collateralized, the community's social capital is used to ensure timely repayments. Social capital is a community's network of relationships and bonds of trust upon which all non-economic and informal economic activity is based. In this particular arrangement, members guarantee each other's loans and in case of delinquency, other members of the group contribute towards the missing payment. Groups are based on trust and members strive to maintain "group solidarity" since continued eligibility for future loans depends on the group's repayment performance (Khandker, 2012).

Loans can also be sequenced so that a few group members receive their loans first and complete repayment before others within the group become eligible for their loans (Bernasek, 2003). In both versions there is strong social pressure on individuals to follow the repayment schedule (Stiglitz, 1990) (Wydick, 1999). Thus, it is said that this arrangement replaces financial collateral with social collateral (Ito, 2003).

Early research on the subject provides a rich narrative on how group lending empowers women by creating a support network and peer mentoring among members, especially as the transactions are usually conducted without the intermediation of men (Hashemi, Schuler, & Riley, 1996) (1997) (Bernasek, 2003) which is especially significant in South Asia where women are seen as the lifelong dependents of men (Kabeer, Huda, & Kaur, 2012).

Also, as group lending requires attendance at regular meetings, women who might otherwise be socially isolated, are able to defend their attendance as a social and household level obligation. Thus, attendance at such meetings is said to have an intrinsic value of its own (Johnson & Rogaly, 1997) and (Osmani, 2007) refers to this as empowerment through mingling.

On the other hand, in her ethnographic account of women debtors in Bangladesh, Karim (2011) provides a detailed account of community-level violence against women debtors. She describes how loan officers threaten delinquents with public humiliation, flogging, breaking into their homes with other community members to confiscate beds, pots, pans and other household items.

The Andhra Pradesh suicides in late 2010 exposed the practices of Indian microfinance institutions to the world. Over indebted borrowers were driven to take their own lives by drinking pesticides, jumping in a pool or by other means when told by loan officers that only in death would debts be forgiven (Kinetz, 2012). Several officers were implicated for the aggressive and threatening ways in which they tried to exact repayment. Considering the evidence against group lending, Roodman(2012) contends that individual lending is more empowering than group lending. Moving on to actual loan use, its seen that microcredit has a limited impact on women's access to choice-enhancing resources it does have a powerful effect on women's ability to influence household decisions. But others are more critical. For instance, one study finds that becoming the primary beneficiaries of a microcredit program does little to increase women's inclusion within the household's cash management (Montgomery, Bhattacharya, & Hulme, 1996). Garikipati(2011) in her review of Indian microfinance finds that when women's loans are used for productive assets the process is disempowering to them, since they lack co-ownership of the household's productive assets.

At the same time, women's autonomy varies, often between regions in the same country (Lieven, 2012) or by households within the same community (Gine, Mansuri, & Picon, 2012) and where autonomy is higher at the baseline we can expect better empowerment related outcomes from the intervention.

It is important to note though that even when women are able to set up small businesses through microfinance, these businesses are usually part of the informal home-based sector (Bernasek, 2003). Research suggests that poor women in developing countries, especially in South and East Asia, are mostly engaged in informal home-based work (Doanne, 2007).

IV. INFORMAL HOME-BASED WORK

The informal sector is characterized by low productivity mainly because of low capital- to-labor ratios, unstable business conditions, lack of social security benefits and no possibility of unionizing for better wage and working conditions (Todaro & Smith, 2012) (Bernasek, 2003).

Similarly, home-based work is considered a peripheral economic activity (Zuberi, 2011). It is largely unaccounted for by economic data but a rough estimate puts the number of home-based workers at 50 million in South Asia alone, over 80 percent of whom are women(Trust, 2006). The compensation is piece-rate and the work is often subcontracted through a middleman. Doanne(2007) describes home-based women workers as being at the bottom of the value-chain. Their income is considered supplemental for the household but more often than not they are unpaid workers in the family business.

At the same time, home-based work offers an opportunity to escape the harsh urban realities of many Southern countries, particularly South Asia. Women in contemporary Pakistani cities such as Karachi and Lahore, especially "working-class" women, face everyday social and physical violence. Public spaces such as the factories where they are employed, the public transport they use to get to work, the narrow alleys they negotiate when they leave their homes, expose them to constant sexual and social threats (Ali, 2012) (Lieven, 2012).

Home-based work is also an important income diversification strategy. There is a growing literature on how poor households diversify their income. While most of it is focused on rural households and diversification into non-farm activities (e.g. (Minot, Epprecht, Anh, & Trun, 2006) (Karugia, Olouch-Kosura, Nyikal, Odume, & Marenya, 2006), there are broad lessons that can be taken from this scholarship. For instance, studies have found that households with multiple sources of income are less likely to suffer from hunger (DeRose, Messer, & Millman, 1998). But research also suggests that the greater the level of household poverty the higher the level of income diversification (Malunda, 2011).

Most importantly, income diversification can have both positive and negative effects. The positives are related to a reduced level of income risk from diversification. It appears that income diversification smoothens both income and consumption patterns in poor households (Dunford, 2000). At the same time, it is often found that when households diversify into too many low-return activities in order to mitigate income risk the result isnot necessarily poverty reducing (Malunda, 2011). This is especially true when you consider the low remuneration capacity of informal home-based work.

Thus, empowerment is a complex topic for there is no real agreement on its exact relationship with overall economic development or even how it should be defined and measured. Further, there are several pros and cons associated with increasing women's economic participation through microcredit schemes.

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