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The work experiences of loan officers in Microfinance: Is it different for women loan officers? Evidence from Zambia

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Abstract

This study seeks to highlight the challenges faced by organisations whose remit it is provide microfinance support to the poor. In doing so, it focuses on loan officers – the ag of delivery on the ground. Based on an intersectional analysis of gender, class and cont the research shows how these interact to influence loan officers' day by day experiences make the job unattractive to particular groups. It is set in the context of two Zambian microfinance institutions seeking to reduce poverty through sustainable lending, using a group-based methodology. The study draws out the dirty, emotional, stressful, gendered, culturally complex and relentless nature of their work on the ground, to argue for a better understanding of grassroots level work and support for loan officers. More specifically, findings show that gender appears to be important as social and cultural norms emerge as major pressure points to female loan officers than their male counterparts- making them less suitable for microfinance work, which traditionally targeted poor women.

Introduction

Loan officers[1] are the faces of the microfinance institution (MFIs) and at the vanguard of microfinance (Matsukawa, 2010). They are the mechanism by which the 'social good' is delivered and managed. Loan officers play an important role in the provision of financial services to the unbanked poor by personally linking them with microfinance institutions (MFIs) (O' Reilly, 2006), yet the paradox of the situation in which they are exploited seems to be treated as secondary to outreach and loan repayment rate targets. This paper accordingly uses an intersectionality[2] perspective to highlight the challenges faced by loan officers and particular factors that shape their day-to-day experiences of grassroots level work and make this work unattractive to particular social groups. Specifically, the paper asks: how do the social axes of gender and class in a Zambian context (re)construct divergent loan officers' experiences with clients and their role performance? Does it matter who performs loan officer work? For example, does the context have a bearing on how the 'social good' is delivered and managed? The paper argues that their critical position at the interface with poor clients gives them considerable influence over access to loans, thereby shaping clients' experience of, and understanding of what microfinance is really about. This is important because their relationships with clients are crucial for client as well as organisational success. These frontline workers are founts of information about poor clients and localities as they spend most of their time in the field with clients. They therefore experience client needs directly. Loan officers are also responsible for collecting payments and pursuing defaulters, making them critical for maintaining MFI portfolio quality (Ross and Denzer, 2011). The study of those factors which influence loan officer' suitability for such work at the frontline and subsequent interactions with the poor, has implications for both the delivery of financial services at the 'bottom of the pyramid' (Prahalad, 2005) and policies towards their recruitment and retention. Our findings for instance do not support the assumption that female loan officers are necessarily more successful in relating with female borrowers in the way inferred by the cultural affinity literature (Cornell and Welch, 1996). The study therefore fills a gap in the loan officer-borrower literature by focusing on loan officers and how they perform developmental work at the grassroots.

Loan officers in the literature

> "Microfinance is a powerful part of the solution in alleviating global poverty. Strengthening the people side of the equation will go a long way to ensure that microfinance institutions have the human capital they need to do their part." (Ross and Denzer, 2011)

Loan officers come lowest in the MFI organizational hierarchy, yet they build and maintain vital client interfaces that ensure institutional survival (Siwale and Ritchie, 2012). Their work is primarily field-based, premised on the assumption of self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline, yet the 'field' is often an open space where loan officers can informally shape policy as well as how microfinance[3] practice develops. Loan officers work very long days,

[1] Other titles such as: field staff, credit officers or fieldworkers have also been used to refer to such MFI employees. This study adopts the title loan officers unless referring to other sources.

[2] Firmly based in sociology, intersectionality theory suggests that – and seeks to examine how – various socially and culturally constructed categories interact on multiple levels to shape social interaction and consequences thereof (see Hancock, 2007; Zander, U et al., 2010; Holvino, 2010). This paper takes this interpretation.

[3] Microfinance generally includes a range of financial services, including loans, savings deposits, insurance, and money transfers provided to low income clients who lack formal financial access. In this study we focus on provision of microcredit in a group-based lending methodology.

doing paperwork and dealing with client issues and remain by far the dominant decision-makers in microloan granting (Agier and Szafarz, 2010).

Other studies have documented different client profiles and found microfinance to be largely female dominated. The women who account for over 60 per cent of clients are often poor and neither literate nor numerate (Gardeva and Rhyne, 2011). Relatively few qualitative studies have examined loan officers' own profiles or compared how male and female loan officers constitute and experience their actual work. Previous findings have indicated that such work is less attractive to well-educated younger men and women when it is compared with government/official jobs (Ahmad, 2002; Goetz, 2001). Their job is of low status and certain problems faced can be gendered (Ahmad, 2003; O' Reilly, 2006). For example, in Bangladesh, Ahmad (2003) found that fieldwork posed a greater challenge for women given their prevailing socio-cultural constraints, while graduates preferred government to NGO jobs because they offered higher rewards and social status. Field workers elsewhere have been considered to be overworked and under-appreciated (Baumann, 2004; Rahman, 1999), making their retention problematic. While research in South Asia has generally found many fieldworkers to be younger men and women drawn from middle-class rural families with secondary or higher education who could not enter the civil service, much less is known about loan officers in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and in particular, the factors that impact on how they construct their work experiences.

Drawing upon Lipsky's (1980) original work on street-level bureaucrats, certain studies have explored the different roles of loan officers in microfinance development. For example, Siwale and Ritchie (2012) found that where client groups were not self – managing and liable to default, loan officers came to perform multiple, ambiguous and at times conflicting and changeable roles. According to the 'street-level bureaucracy' model, loan officers are almost like the street bureaucrats who mediate the distribution of micro loans and can exercise a relatively high degree of discretion over who accesses financial services. They are an important link in the group-based lending process because they meet clients on a regular basis and establish the necessary close relationships which might facilitate loan repayments. Others have investigated different factors affecting the outreach of MFIs in SSA (Baumann, 2004; Mukama, et al., 2005; Nissanke, 2002), while Volschenk and Biekpe (2003) have considered the specific factors limiting the performance and growth of South African microfinance. However little research reveals the true grassroots experiences of loan officers in terms of how cultural and social constraints placed upon them make their already difficult job even more challenging-especially for women loan officers. Within the conventional microfinance institutional literature, the position and how loan officers are exploited is often presented as if it were tangential to the transactions involved. In particular, how loan officers are treated and the factors which enable or constrain their interactions with clients are only vaguely inferred, especially in economic impact studies. This paper therefore uses an intersectional lens to challenge our expectations of those who might be the most appropriate agents of microfinance delivery on the ground. In so doing, it focuses on loan officers' experiences and reveals why their work is regarded as tough and can be inappropriate for women in particular. It further argues that loan officers' class and related socio-cultural factors shape the way loan officers experience, understand and interpret the work they do as well playing an important part in determining who is deemed suitable for such challenging grassroots work and who also becomes marginalized as a result.

Case study: Zambian Microfinance Institutions

Zambian microfinance is relatively young, mainly urban based, and hitherto under researched. It has not grown to meet donors/government expectation in terms of outreach numbers as well as its own financial sustainability. The two institutions studied are amongst the larger and longer established loan enterprise institutions. Both FINCA and CETZAM are licensed by Bank of Zambia (BOZ) as deposit taking microfinance institutions. FINCA Zambia began operations in January 2001, funded by USAID. With nearly 10 years of experience, FINCA operates in 4 provinces out of 9, and boasts of 12,000 clients (Mix Market, 2011). CETZAM, founded in 1998, currently operates in 3 provinces with nearly 6000 active clients. However, in 2002 CETZAM had approximately 16,000 clients, but virtually collapsed in early 2003 amid allegations of fraud, poor management information systems, loan delinquency and rapid unbalanced growth (Dixon et al., 2007), before restructuring and redeveloping its portfolio. Both these MFIs face the continuing challenge of increasing their overall outreach. They were selected for study not only on grounds of size or reputation but accessibility for research purposes (Creswell, 1998). CETZAM and FINCA are not the only MFIs in Zambia, but other institutions are either relatively new or were inaccessible due to researcher's time and financial constraints. In the two selected MFIs, loan officers were the major unit of focus, consistent with the research objective.

Loan officers in this study came from humble and modest family backgrounds. Majority of them lived in the same localities as their clients, and were familiar with their wider socio-economic context. In doing their work, loan officers regard social relations and 'networks of the poor' (Elyachar, 2005) as key ingredients for the success of group lending, even though at times some clients can manipulate the same social ties and withhold vital information. Their work involves dealing with often sensitive and emotion laden issue of debt amid poverty. Consequently, they are expected to be committed to helping people. In Zambia, most clients are found in the large informal sector – for example, 'market women' with small businesses that are either home based, or trading in scattered open markets or selling by the roadside. Reaching such clients involves walking long distances on potholed, rugged roads, or working with clients in dusty/muddy urban markets so basic logistical problems abound. CETZAM for instance uses motorcycles to ease mobility problems but not every loan officer (especially women) prefers them while other supporting resources are scarce. Out in the field, they found themselves conducting a lot of work outside their job description and outside normal work hours. They were also pressured to meet imposed client target numbers, as well as actively reducing the at risk loans in the portfolio by following up with clients in default. As later discussions will show, many loan officers could relate more with negative than positive experiences of working with the poor.

Methodology

Negotiations for obtaining research access began with the chief executive officers without whose assent, fieldwork was not possible. Entry into CETZAM was facilitated by the researcher's previous work with them, while FINCA was less enthusiastic and more guarded. Access with FINCA was only achieved through the Association of the Microfinance Institutions in Zambia (of which FINCA is a member). The Association issued an introductory letter on condition that a research fee of about £30 equivalent was paid. After 10 days of further negotiations with top management a go ahead was finally given but, even after the top management of both MFIs approved entry, there was still concern that the research would 'disrupt' loan officers' on-going work. Daily access subsequently involved continuing negotiation and renegotiation with middle managers as well loan officers (Ahrens, 2004; Bryman, 2001; Burgess, 1991; Hall and Hall, 1996). For most institutions in Zambia, information is seen as more of a private rather than public good, and access is restricted accordingly. Fieldwork for this study was conducted between July and August 2010, and here includes questionnaire responses from 68 out of 104 loan officers, semi-structured interviews with 7 branch managers and 4 senior managers (1 from human resources) and 20 loan officers from branches on the Copperbelt and Lusaka provinces. A questionnaire was used to collect data on loan officers' age, education background, and motivation for work, family and gender with a view to exploring how these impacted upon their experiences and microfinance work.

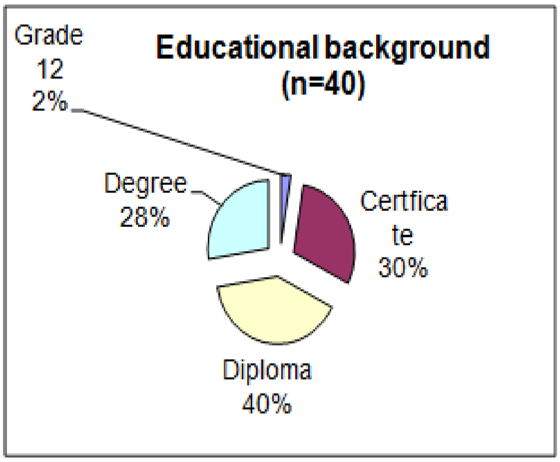
While statistical data can provide generalised results, interviews can add insights into how education and gender were enacted in the field. This flexible open approach to research allowed loan officers to voice their experiences in ways which the researcher could probe further. Interviews with top management differed. They were asked about their respective organizations and what they thought about loan officers' recruitment and work practices. Although the interview questions were broad and pre-set, they differed between respective organizations, depending on their relevance to the immediate context.

Participation in interviews was voluntary and loan officers in particular could refuse to answer any question posed. For instance, one married female loan officer declined to comment on how her job affected her family life because of the emotions it evoked. In this study, it was necessary to respond to suspicions surrounding my identity, especially where loan officers asked why they were the focus, and repeatedly asked 'who are you?', and 'who are you doing this research for?' After further explanation and assurances about confidentiality interviewed respondents were asked to give their informed consent and also whether their accounts could be tape-recorded. Although none openly objected to tape recording, their noisy and disruptive as well as fluid work situation made it so difficult have clear recordings. Under these circumstances, tape recording was abandoned in favour of in situ note taking, and further developing the notes later, while the software package QSR Nvivo was used for further thematic analysis.

Because microfinance involves close personal interaction with clients, it was important to observe how loan officers went about their work in a real live field setting. Direct observation proved particularly useful (Kosny and MacEachen, 2010) in addition to the verbal explanations offered through interviews. Although this allowed the researcher to get a sense of the fluidity of loan officers' daily work and also their deeper frustration with clients, the researcher's very presence had some bearing upon how loan officers responded to some on-going challenging situations in the field.

Findings

In what follows the paper draws on intersectionality as a framework for understanding the challenges faced by loan officers whose remit is to provide microfinance support to the financially excluded. The findings are analysed with a view to appreciate the way that social class and gender interact with context to shape loan officers' divergent experiences of grassroots work in Zambia. For this study, a total of 68 loan officers out of 104 were studied. 74% male and 26% female, with most employed in their respective MFIs for two years or longer, a third for less than a year. The study found that, loan officers with high levels of education considered themselves to belong to a social class different from that of their clients. Because microfinance primarily targets the poor-and in particular women, who are of little or no education and socially marginalised, loan officers referred to them as belonging to a 'lower class' when describing who their institutions targeted. In the context of Zambia, where university graduates are clearly in the minority (see Fig 2), attaining university level typically qualifies one to a higher standing in society and therefore should have a job that confirms that given status.



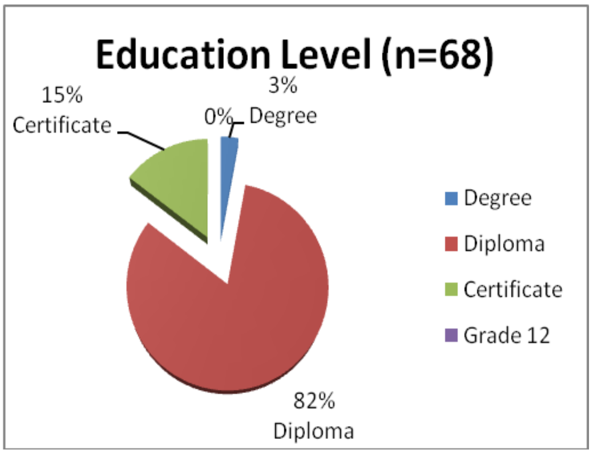
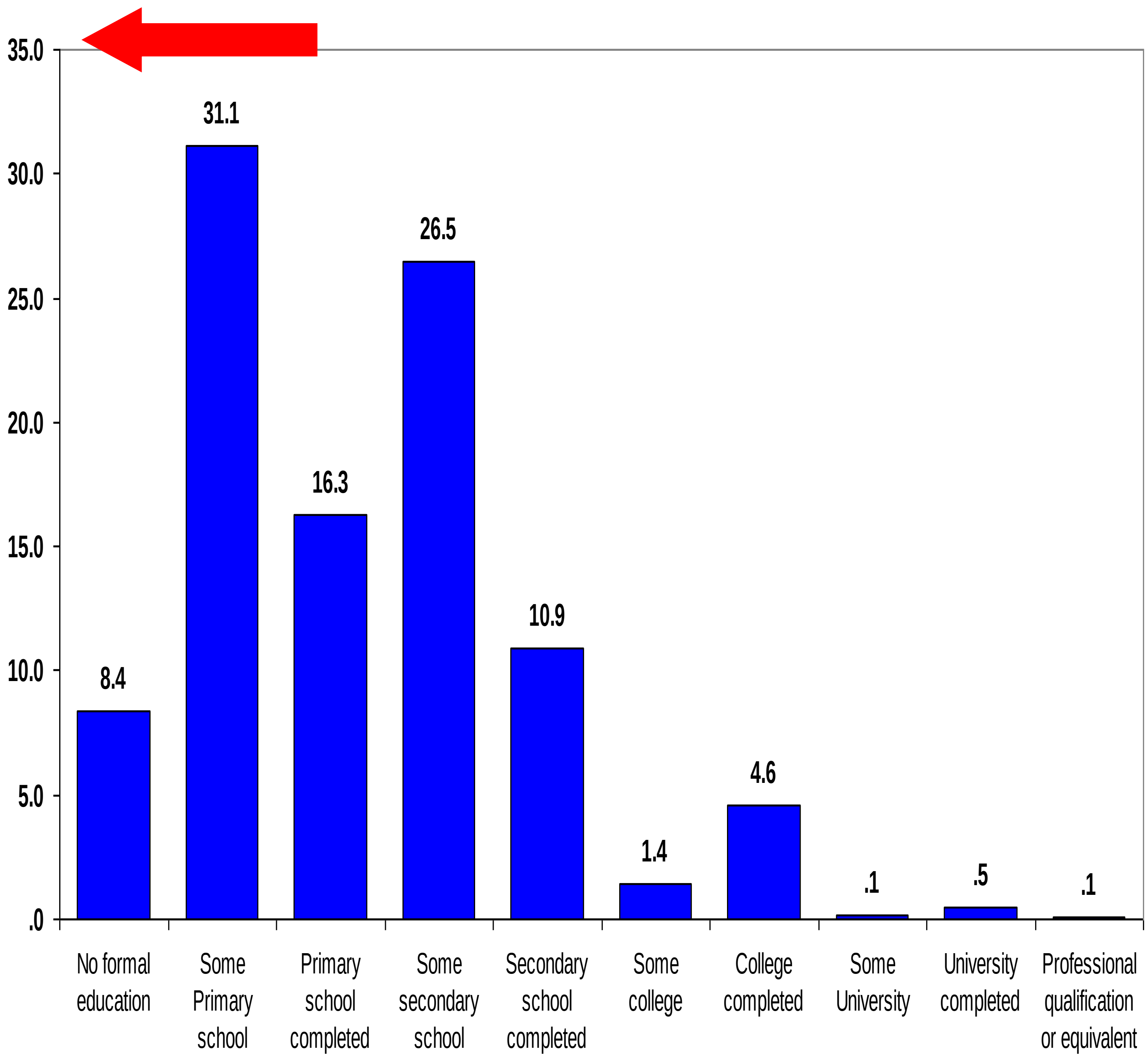


Fig. 1a Author's survey, 2004

Fig.1b Author's survey, 2010

According to FinScope (2010), the overall education profile of the adult Zambian population is low, with more than half (56%) having primary school education or less and, within that, 8% having no formal education whatsoever (see Fig. 1.2). Only 6.7% have college and university education. Such limited education levels are significant as it is important for the purposes of this paper to understand that the largest part of the MFI's client population were less educated than their loan officers. Most loan officers had a diploma or a lesser qualification. For example, in 2004, 40% had diplomas, but this rose to 82% in 2010, while the certificate category halved from 30% to 15% during the same period, as Figs 1a & b show. However, there were only 2 university graduates at FINCA while CETZAM had none. Interestingly, educational levels between male and female loan officers were not significantly different.

Fig. 2 Education profile of Zambian adults



Source: FinScope Zambia (2010)

There were mixed reactions from those interviewed. Most senior managers claimed to be satisfied with loan officers' education attainments, but faced the challenge of retaining them. They referred to graduate loan officers as 'over qualified' for grassroots level work. This could be because those with diplomas and below had fewer choices and so tended to stay longer. Consequently, there was a significant fall in university degree holders, declining from 28% in 2004 to just 3% in 2010. When asked why there was such a sharp fall, CETZAM chief executive officer simply asserted that, 'university graduates do not fit in well', while another senior manager claimed that, since performance was more important than level of qualification, diploma holders worked better.

> "I think in Zambian MFIs, diploma holders perform better than university graduates. Diploma holders easily accept any type of a job" (Operations Manager-July 2010).

A local microfinance specialist was of the view that 'realities on the ground' did not favour university graduates, as they quickly moved on to other attractive, higher status jobs.

> "A loan officer is one who is prepared to work outside the office- in the field. But the question to ask is; are these graduate loan officers ready to work in filthy difficult conditions? If not, then there is a gap between loan officers and clients. Loan officers have to be trained to work with people of a different social class".

The Head of Credit at CETZAM made similar judgements about graduates 'not being suitable' thus:

> "The work is not attractive to degree holders as it tends to demean their qualification. This leads to high turnover. Currently there are no degree holders working as loan officers at CETZAM. However, we need more educated loan officers now than before because of the new products and our new status as a licensed deposit taking MFI".

Although a basic certificate in education suited early microfinance development (see Fig.1a, field survey, 2004), this was judged inadequate if loan officers were to adapt to the competitive environment and changing work demands, as one branch manager explained:

> "Loan officers need to have a diploma especially that FINCA will soon become a deposit taking bank. Low education levels can be problematic as there is much to process (paper work) but also being too educated (meaning university graduate level) can be a setback in forming relationships especially with people of a lower class. These graduates do not last on the job".

The inference was that university degree holders worked less well with the poor than loan officers with lesser qualifications. Graduates were regarded as less willing to interact with the poor and concerned about being seen to be walking and working in muddy and dusty markets or even ride motorbikes. One male loan officers with a diploma claimed that:

> "Most degree holders just come to use the organisation as stepping-stones for better paid office jobs. Maybe individual business loans [meant for the less poor] might be the best products for university graduates".

It would seem that the 'well educated' were deemed 'too complicated' and 'theoretical' to the poor themselves-especially those in group loans. Graduate loan officers (both male and female) themselves indicated their frustration thus:

> "You see madam this work is not for university graduates. The job needs someone who can bring themselves low and 'fit into' the local environment. It requires less of your brains and more of your social side and empathy. In addition, a loan officer occupies the lowest rank in the organisational structure. In short, we feel degraded as graduates." (Male loan officer)
>
> "When we were being interviewed they told us that loan officers were key and so I thought loan officers had some status- but, oh no, we are nowhere. There is no regard for a loan officer, that is what I have seen and yet management expects a lot. Initially, MFIs just used to employ school leavers but now they are trying to take graduates on. But what graduate can work like this? Besides, you don't need to be a graduate to work as loan officer. It just needs someone who can assimilate things and act. Things out there are tough and rough and yet none of these senior managers have been out there. I find it depressing, even though I do like working with the poor, but the conditions under which we operate are not good enough. ". (Female loan officer)

MFIs it would seem, want to employ those with just enough education to do the job and with sufficient need to work exceptionally hard. They want those who can and are committed to work with their clients-the poor. What is less obvious however is the notion of 'class' manifesting itself through levels of education attained. Loan officers talked of 'bringing themselves low' and 'dealing with people of a lower social class', signifying a social barrier which runs against the very social origins of microfinance. These loan officers could not be taught to be motivated socially in order to fit with their institution's mission. This finding supports Agier and Szafarz's (2010) view that MFIs have a hiring policy and practice that ensures credit officers are well-marched with their organisation's mission and goals. University graduates had entered expecting high social and professional status (similar to that of credit officers in formal banking) yet, as the extracts above show, they were soon 'disappointed' with the fluid situations they encountered as well as their low status both inside and outside their MFI. These sentiments however, should not be taken to mean that graduates actively resented working for MFIs. Rather, they disliked particular aspects of the job which made them look less important, 'invisible' and intellectually unchallenged. Therefore in situations of exploitation, well educated men and women have more options and inclined not to fully apply themselves to an already difficult job. But while the educated openly talked about their unwillingness to work at the grassroots level, non-graduates could also find this problematic:

> "You see, we are the pillars of MFIs, but least recognised and appreciated. We do the donkeywork for others but are currently not motivated. A loan officer can be fired any time. Besides, there is no ladder for promotion. I have been a loan officer for 4 years now and have made no progress. This is frustrating." (Diploma holder loan officer)

> "This job puts so much pressure on you that you end up pursuing clients wherever you meet them, including at church. You forget that it's a different environment. It's horrible!" (Diploma holder loan officer)

Loan officers indicated that working with the poor required 'commitment', 'humility' and 'passion', virtues that a few openly admitted not to readily possess, whatever their social class identity.

These findings are similar to what Ahmad (2003) and Goetz (2001) found in Bangladesh, where microfinance NGOs at first attracted graduate loan officers who soon came to prefer government jobs because they were high ranking and respectable. They too, found it difficult working with the poor. Certain Bangladeshi NGOs' policy was to recruit the less educated because they were more readily compliant. Interviews with MFI managers here revealed that the changing microfinance landscape may itself attract more graduates where MFIs begin to operate like retail banks, thereby providing more office based employment-away from the field.

Doing microfinance work: gender and context

Development agencies have been keen to mobilize more women in poverty relief programmes (Molyneux, 2002). According to a report by Microfinance Insights (2008), microfinance has been promoted as a tool to empower women clients, yet the presence of women in staff and management position is not reflective of the client base. Johnson (2004) finds microfinance to be gendered by design and purpose and that it has often targeted and worked with women, and also proved most sustainable where women are the leading re-payers. But what does it require of the gender of loan officers? While it is argued that female loan officers should be more suited to interacting with (often fellow female) clients, field research has been inconclusive. In South Asia, Ahmad (2002, 2003) found an increasing number of female field workers, partly due to donor influence, and also because they claimed certain advantages over men in working with rural poor women within a gender-segregated society. Isaia (2005) also found that female loan officers were mostly suited to such work in Jordan, due to its distinctive cultural character. In Egypt, Elyachar (2005) observed how men used women to mobilize other women to be "trained" for microenterprise loans. Would such gender bias still hold in places where microfinance institutions are concentrated in urban areas and in societies which have been less observably gender-segregated?

This study found that, out of 68 loan officers, only 18 (26%) were female, in direct contrast to the gender of their clientele. Out of 18 females, 9 were married and with children. A breakdown by institution revealed that 13 out of 45 and 5 out of 23 loan officers were female at FINCA and CETZAM respectively[4]. Unfortunately, the evidence is no better in terms of gender parity at the management level. At the time of the study, the top most senior positions in the two MFIs were all held by men, and the pattern was not different at operational levels, with more male branch managers than female. This high concentration of male loan officers in these two MFIs and other group based institutions in Zambia could benefit from an intersectional analysis of context and gender. Furthermore, context can represent both the organisational as well as societal structures that shape how the economic and social good is delivered. From the context of the organisation, loan officers pointed to inadequate resources such as computers, mobility difficulties, and unrealistic targets and demand on their time. All loan officers complained about not being listened to by management and worked long hours under very difficult environments. On the other hand, context can in this case, relate to prevailing cultural settings within a society that could place certain constraints on some groups of loan officers. When it came to interacting with and managing client groups, all loan officers pointed to difficulties managing their cultural expected position while ensuring they remained true to their institutions' goals and business model. But this was more pronounced with females who came under pressure to subordinate themselves to men and male authority figures.

To illustrate these challenges, a female branch manager observed that:

> "Much is expected of females than males generally when it comes to respecting elders, and that is our cultural norm. A female loan officer is expected to be suitably dressed to maintain 'self-respect' and conform. In addition, they are expected to be sympathetic, submissive and merciful. In a way, clients take advantage of female loan officers. But I have also observed that clients are more respectful towards married female loan officers than singles."

A male loan officer added:

> "Some clients (with arrears) generally argue that female loan officers are usually disrespectful. I think this has to do with our cultural norms where a woman is not expected to shout at a man or an elderly woman! I have however, observed that female loan officers do discriminate in treating their clients. They tend to have respect for men more than female clients and this can create a lot of tensions within groups. As you might be aware this job can be very demanding emotionally. So women tend to 'blow the fuse' easily resulting in sharp disputes with clients". (Married male loan officer)

[4] The total number of loan officers was 26 for CETZAM and 78 for FINCA as at August 2010. Therefore figures in this section relate to the 68 questionnaires returned. In addition, all loan officers' supervisors were male. With expansion in the two MFIs, loan officers' numbers are likely to be higher.

Others have found women fieldworkers' authority publicly questioned and that they faced more family obligations and logistical problems (Ahmad, 2002; O'Reilly 2004). This might suggest that microfinance fieldwork could be more problematic for females than males, resulting into their relatively high early 'drop-out' rate (Goetz, 2001; Isaia, 2005; O'Reilly 2006). Discussions with loan officers' supervisors and male loan officers suggested that, comparatively, female loan officers displayed integrity and passion for their work but out in the field, suffered more from the 'cultural card' being played against them by their clients.
These perceptions could suggest that, because of wider cultural expectations, female loan officers' work was made even more challenging and therefore viewed as less suitable than men. It is important to point out that this deemed unsuitability of female loan officers may also be 'context dependent'. For example, female clients in South Asia have been reported to prefer fellow women loan officers to men, especially in credit programmes that incorporate education on gender equality and reproductive health (Ahmad, 2002; Goetz, 2001). In this study, negative perceptions about female loan officers could have been overstated because loan delinquency was an ever pressing issue (Dixon, et al., 2007; Siwale and Ritchie, 2012), which made certain loan officers appear synonymous with the masculine job of a debt collector. All women loan officers talked about the conflict between their feminine side and the expected masculine approach to the job especially when dealing with defaulting clients.

There were other gender related dynamics that were particularly applicable to female loan officers with families, an important aspect that has been neglected within the microfinance literature. Married women experienced work-family conflict that generated a sense of guilt over perceptions of insufficiency in their roles in the home and the office. They spontaneously used metaphors of 'juggling' (Emslie and Hunt, 2009) and 'dilemma' to express these difficulties. Combining these spheres was notably challenging:

> "I do find it difficult to be both a 'good' wife and the 'committed' loan officer expected by the organisation. But, fortunately for me, I have a supportive husband who at times encourages me to work even on Saturdays for the sake of my job, while he remains home baby-sitting (not many husbands would do that!)" (Married female loan officer -C)

> "Married female loan officers generally find it hard combining endless work demands with domestic chores. I work so hard, leaving the office late and reporting very early just to ensure paper work is done and loans are disbursed on time. I have even become a 'bad wife', at least from my husband's perspective. There is a lot of pressure in this job because our minds are ever engaged -it's psychological!" (Married female loan officer-P)

These women also described how they worried about office tasks while they were at home (for example, having 'sleepless nights' over groups in arrears) and how their work sometimes left them exhausted. Some felt their work to be so stressful and tiring that family life was seriously affected. It has been widely acknowledged that women take more responsibility for household labour and childcare (Gregory and Milner, 2009; Grönlund, 2007). As in developed countries, balancing work with family life is becoming more important in Zambia, where many women are now opting to have paid employment. Consequently, these narratives indicate that the time and effort devoted to their households could leave them less time to devote to demands of securing a suitably approved loan portfolio at work.

Married female loan officers, (including female managers) faced conflict between their family and work priorities. They reported that many husbands were concerned about their vulnerability when they made follow ups on defaulting male clients.

> "You see loan officers' work knows no boundaries and so a married woman has to ensure that her husband feels safe and assured especially when dealing with male clients. We have to account for our whereabouts each time we go home late. You cannot stay long on this job. You have to move on to something less vulnerable and less stressing." (Married female loan officer)

> "Female loan officers seem to have a lot on their plate. Men have more time as this work is 24 hours – and it's there in your head. In addition, married females have to deal with suspicions from their husbands, as well as from wives of male clients who at times accuse them of flirting with their husbands, especially for single girls." (Married male loan officer)

Implicitly, married women were here admitting to the strains that accountability of this sort had upon relationships by raising questions of trust. They also encountered negative attitudes, predicated on unsubstantiated views that married women in general lacked due commitment to work because of their family obligations. One married female loan officer indeed commented that "getting pregnant while on this job is a 'disruption', as management was concerned about meeting targets and looking for a maternity cover". Informal conversations with most married males privately revealed that they would not allow their wives to work as loan officers and referred to lack of public respect, emotional stress, physical exhaustion and vulnerability when out in the field.

> "I will be honest with you. I would not like to see my wife work late in the night, be taken advantage of by other men and come home dirty, sweaty and worn out. My wife worked as a loan officer before I married her and I do not see how she could have continued in that role especially now that she is expecting our first baby" (Male loan officer/supervisor).

As regards work performance women field workers have elsewhere been reported to feel they have to further 'prove' themselves by being 'twice as good' as men (Goetz, 2001; O'Reilly, 2006).

> "The job requires fitness as it involves a lot of walking. It also requires time, which most ladies do not have. So the women who have made it are the ruthless and tough ones. Soft ones have either resigned or been fired, as meeting targets is an issue in microfinance. A female loan officer has to become a 'man' to do the job" (Single male loan officer)

The head of credit at CETZAM explained that:

> "I am of the view that from clients' perspective, the gender of a loan officer does not really matter. Some clients, though, had indicated preference for male loan officers on the grounds that 'they found most single females to be rude, disorganised, while the married ones tended to be late to meetings and relatively slow in processing loans'. But from an institution's perspective, male loan officers tend to be more productive due to mobility advantages. For example male loan officers can use motorbikes, walk long distances and work late. So, I know that implicitly, most branch managers prefer male loan officers because they work late and cover larger areas in a day than females do".

A senior manager at FINCA candidly asserted:

> "In our business, constant interaction is very important in ensuring loan repayment and because of that clients do not like changing loan officers as it takes time to build relationships. So my view is that this *maternity* leave tends to affect work of female rather than male loan officers. From where we are standing, these privileges can be disruptive. So male loan officers work without much interruption, which is good for group dynamics. Besides, the work requires a lot of effort and sweating so males are more preferable".

Realising he was talking to a female researcher, he added the caveat that:

“When it comes to integrity, honesty, attention to detail and people skills, ladies tend to perform well in FINCA. From my point of view, female loan officers are more suitable to village banking because they are more patient and besides the majority of FINCA clients are women. Individual business loans are more suited to males though women do just as well”

Although there was policy stating that female loan officers could take maternity leave when required, the reality as presented by the nature of their work was that they did that at their own risk. While on maternity they still feared their loan portfolio could go bad if clients took advantage of their absence and defaulted on repayments. In other cases, it was fear of another loan officer ruining relationships they worked hard to build.

Age: the energetic and the youthful

Loan officers were also drawn from a specific age group, partly because fieldwork was demanding and required a particular level of physical fitness and endurance.

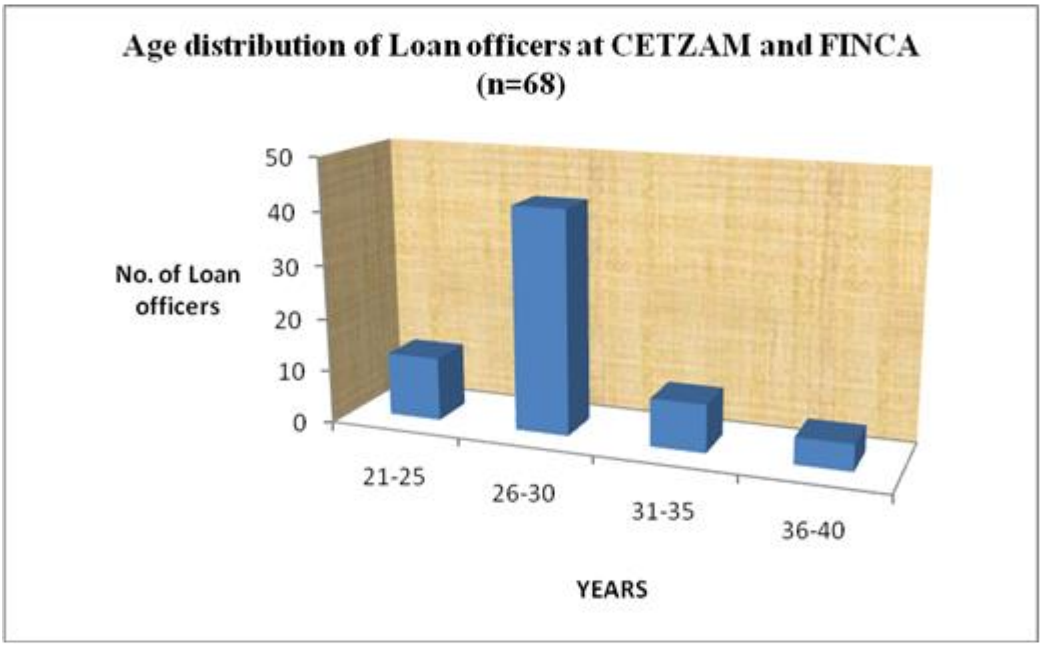


Figure 3. Age Distribution of loan officers at CETZAM and FINCA (2010)

Zambia has a relatively young aged population. Almost half (47%) the Zambian adults are under 30 (CSO, 2010). The average age of loan officers was 27.6 years in FINCA and 29.7 years in CETZAM. Their age distribution is in line with the national adult population, with 27.5 % ranging between 16 and 20 and 53.3% between 21 and 40 (FinScope, 2007, 2010). As fig 3 shows, 51 loan officers were aged between 26 and 35 and only 12 were 25 or under, of which just 3 were female. Ahmad (2002) found a similar trend in Bangladesh. Fieldwork requires ‘commitment’ and involves rigorous physical activity since loan officers have to travel to clients’ homes, business premises or trading markets. Age of a loan officer becomes interesting when it relates with context. Findings here indicate that, with proper and sufficient training, MFIs could and did rely on the young and energetic as loan officers. They were considered less demanding and with fewer family obligations. But because microfinance relies upon direct interaction, the age and maturity of loan officers did matter.

> "More mature loan officers tend to work well with group loans because of clients' age which is usually 25 to 65. Younger loan officers (25 and under) though energetic tend to be impatient and have problems handling clients and most lack people skills" (Head of credit-CETZAM)

In a society like Zambia that can be hierarchical, children and very young people are groomed and expected to respect anyone of their parents' age or older, and to address older women and men as 'mum', 'auntie', or 'grandma' and 'uncle' or 'granddad' respectively. Within this context, the age of a loan officer does matter, especially when dealing with problematic clients and when required to offer counselling. One young male loan officer, with just 6 months on the job complained about the tension between expected cultural norms and work.

> "I do not even understand myself anymore. I am not the person that I used to be. I now quarrel with people, elderly vulnerable people. It is difficult to remain respectful and meet repayment targets."

Most MFIs' clients in Zambia tend to be older than their loan officers and disdained any lack of respect for them as 'parents'. Parker (2003) found that, where facilitators (fieldworkers) were younger than many of farmers they worked with, further difficulties occurred. Porter (2003) also found similar societal expectations – where many Ghanaians stressed the importance in their culture of the need for the young to be 'polite' and non-confrontational. Others observe similar interpersonal issues within SSA, and in particular South Africa, where Baumann (2004) found that loan officers tended to be young, and lacked 'softer' skills and a 'mature' work ethics. In this study most loan officers under 25 years of age and with less experience informally acknowledged that they found managing clients' groups stressful, especially where clients used a 'cultural card' to avoid repayment knowing that their job security depended on meeting loan collection targets.

Interestingly, these socially constructed expectations of the young were actively gendered in ways that made the task of female loan officers even harder. For instance, more deference has long been expected of Zambian women and girls towards men in general. Consequently, younger and single female loan officers were reportedly 'bullied' by older female clients who questioned their authority (but not that of younger male loan officers), and accused them of being rude if they argued at meetings. One female loan officer cited an incident where an elderly woman client insisted that she risked not getting married if she carried on 'shouting' at older people. Male loan officers (though younger) had a different experience where they took advantage of a patriarchal culture and instilled fear into clients (especially women), prompting females to request for their support when handling more difficult and abusive clients. Culture and norms are not static nor are they given, but are shaped by people, and hence are flexible and fluid and change over time. In this case, older clients found themselves at crossroads with the fluidity of business language and norms especially in urban settings of Zambia.

Discussion and Conclusions

The paper has shown that the work that loan officers do at the bottom of the pyramid can be difficult. This is more pronounced where loan agents are not treated properly by their employers, and even more challenging for women due to additional cultural and social constraints. Evidence shows that it is at the interface with clients that loan officers were most vulnerable regardless of their gender or social class. Microfinance is gendered by design and purpose (Johnson, 2004) and therefore the apparent 'unsuitability' of female loan officers is surprising because women are often the espoused prime target of microfinance for reasons of efficiency and equality (Armerndariz and Morduch, 2005; Mayoux, 2001). But in certain contexts, gender norms and practices can vary between and within different cultures, making the experiences of female loan officers challenging. In this study, female loan officers were often expected to be submissive and 'motherly' in their approach and their authority could be publicly challenged whenever they were regarded as breaking unspoken and implied femininity rules (Kosny and MacEachen, 2010). Added to this, married women often experienced work – family conflict. As noted elsewhere, the social construction of gender makes motherhood less openly negotiable (Grönlund, 2007) and women continue to take most responsibility for organising and conducting childcare and related domestic work (Van dee Lippe, 2007). The implications are that, married women are going to have to make hard choices by sacrificing one area to succeed in the other, and in this study the female turnover was particularly high. Meanwhile, limited support if any was availed to those affected and the MFIs here did not have a stated policy regarding work-family life balance so that loan officers were expected to be ever-available. It's therefore not hard to see why the number of women loan officers has been declining given the work demands as well as the cultural and social pressures placed on them. These concerns are important where the intensity of their work impacted on their health, willingness and ultimately on their productivity and retention.

These findings here need to be anchored in their specific socio-cultural context. The socio-cultural particularities of different societies matter. Working with the poor at the grassroots, in different contexts, with varying cultural, political and economic climates is bound to generate experiences and challenges unique to particular areas. The practices of traditional societies in SSA have long publicly prioritised men, age, power and social status (Beugre and Offodile, 2001; Blunt and Jones, 1997; Kauda, 2010). Thus conformity with traditional gender expectations for behaviour was common for men and women, but within this context, women loan officers bore the brunt of such expectations. This means that, from a human resources' viewpoint, the changing nature of microfinance and the socio-cultural environment of loan officers' work needs to be better understood in order to appreciate their attitudes to, and also potential difficulties with the interventions that they are expected to implement. Granovetter (1985) earlier argued that the values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours which employees bring into the organization are variously shaped by their wider society. In this case loan officers' experiences were partly shaped by the pressure to conform to the established societal rather than organizational values as they interacted with clients. We therefore argue that certain Zambian cultural values might constrain widespread development interventions at the grassroots and be particularly disempowering to women loan officers.

The paper has also argued that, in the context of Zambia, social status matters. Those of lesser education (diploma and below) found the 'social class' barrier less difficult than those with university degrees. Graduates could not easily popularize microfinance at the grassroots, but easily identified with managerial positions. As such they soon became frustrated and 'irrelevant' to bottom-up developmental work. Such graduates may have equated their education with jobs and prospects that would distance them from lower social classes. In Zambian society where less than 2% of adult population has completed university (FinScope, 2010), graduate loan officers may feel 'stigmatized' and/or devalued by being seen in crowded, dirty street markets explaining and selling microfinance products. It is not surprising therefore, that graduates considered themselves (and perceived by others) as misfits. At issue here is occupational marginalization. Careers were not thought to be made in the field. The field was in effect a 'dead zone'. This finding has important human resource implications. The employment of university graduates (of a superior class to that of clients) could have serious implications for developing client outreach and group-based microfinance as MFIs are likely to distance themselves from the very poor and illiterate women they were originally intended to serve. As Solomon (2003) noted, the educational background of frontline staff (loan officers) needs to be understood in order to appreciate whether and how they ‘fit’ into the microfinance lending methodology and the actual field situation in which it is practiced.

Thirdly, the paper has highlighted the importance of loan officers’ role in the work of alleviating global poverty through microfinance and their experiences thereof. The implications here are twofold: first, human resources’ strategy is one of the most critical aspects of microfinance service delivery and one that could benefit from loan officers’ input. Loan officers are the mechanism by which the ‘social good’ is delivered and managed. Consequently, MFIs’ managers need to recognize that sustainable success depends upon careful attention to human resources -in particular, the ‘taken for granted’ frontline loan officers. If not, MFIs might not benefit enough from their tacit knowledge to reduce their disaffection, resulting in reduced number of poor people accessing credit and other financial services. Secondly, these findings point to the need for management to put in place work policies that are sensitive to work-family balance to partly address the female underrepresentation as reported in this study. MFIs here face an alarming gender gap and serious turnover issues. Managers who recognize the critical role of loan officers in extending client outreach may give them the necessary support as a result. A context based reflective approach would give loan officers more voice in informing their lending models and related policy and organizational issues. Although this research has focused on loan officers in Zambia, it is likely to have broader resonance. Many African MFIs seek to extend their client outreach but their continuing disregard for loan officers could make the much espoused ‘bottom-up development’ programmes like microfinance less relevant to the poor and less effective in contributing towards some of the Millennium development goals – such as women empowerment and poverty reduction.

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