

Enhancing Economic Development through Economic Empowerment: Challenges for Women

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ABSTRACT

Status of women around the world varies among parts of the world. Some developing countries like Africa, the status of women is low compared to the developed countries. There is an urgent need to give attention to the needs and problems of women to enable them to enjoy and exercise their rights and opportunities; thus, women can be part of a group contributing to national development. Generally, women and economy often are separated as two different identities in enhancing the sustainable economy. The facts that the number of women working in the industries is less than the number of men are no longer false. Therefore, the paper aims to discuss women empowerment specifically in regard to economic empowerment. Three elements, namely microfinance, education and legal aid that contribute towards economic empowerment for women also will be argued in the paper. The challenges women faced towards achieving economic empowerment also will be discussed.

Keywords: *women, economic empowerment, women empowerment*

INTRODUCTION

Generally, women and economy often are separated as two different identities in enhancing the sustainable economy. The facts that the number of women working in the industries is less than the number of men are no longer false. Industries are often connected to the specific skills which require a strong capacity of human's energy, which is commonly a man's domain. This is why the need for men to work in the industries is higher than women. However, to achieve a sustainable economy, people should understand the importance of gender equality. This article will discuss the concept of women empowerment. There are three elements that contribute towards enhancing economic empowerment for women. The challenges of women faced towards achieving economic empowerment also will also be discussed.

Background

Empowerment as a concept was brought to International Women's Conference at Nairobi in 1985. The conference concluded that empowerment is a redistribution of power and control of resources in favour of women through positive intervention (Aruna Goel, 2009). Women's empowerment can be defined as a process whereby women become able to organise themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination (Keller B. & D.C Mbwewe, 1991). Women need to make their own decision making rather than depend on their husband or men's sibling to support their family. Women can also generate their own income as to gather satisfaction in their life, same as men.

Through economic empowerment, women can improve their status in the family and among societies. Microfinance, education, and legal aid can help women to gather strong entrepreneurship in doing business and generate their own income, thus, improve their status and dispose their sub-coordination position in society. Microfinance can be defined as the provision of financial supports to poor individuals or groups. It is used to help the development of a business as well as to expand and to help improve the inequalities in society. Education

can be described as universal education and training, principally at the primary and secondary school level. Education is a basic right of human and it plays important roles to change one's life based on the knowledge that they have. Education is valuable in terms of getting the right resources and making decision. While legal aid can best be defined as support to women's use of the legal system to obtain what is theirs. With the availability of legal aids, women can develop their own self-esteem and confidence in voicing their right as a human and to be treated equally as men.

THE CHALLENGES IN ENHANCING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

There are several factors that contribute to these challenges, whereby women need to overcome before they can contribute as much to enhance their economy. Cagatay (1998) argued that women are poorer in many societies regardless of districts and countries. Women always have a limited access and possession of land, labour and credits, earned income, and often being treated unfairly in the labour market. The burden for women is when they have to generate their own income while also being responsible for the family and community. The gender norms between men and women can best be differentiated by these norms. Women often do the housework while the husband or men's sibling work to support the family. However, when women are generating income by working, they are still responsible for housework.

Cleaver and Schreiber (1994) argued women's lack of time or the excessive amount of time they must spend each day on household tasks were the single most binding constraint on female productivity. Women tend to be more concerned about the daily housework rather than men. Women tend to leave their jobs after getting married. Cagatay (1998) also argues about the lack of skills that women possessed in order to generate their own income. For many of the low income countries, women often lack literacy skills which impede them from getting a good job. Vocational and skills training are mostly dominated by men. In many industries, for example, 80% of the skilled worker is men, while women tend to be clustered in clerical work. Women can be seen as desk worker, where they do the typing and letter writing.

While women is lacking in education, their right of property possession is also being discriminated. Cagatay (1998) points out that the unfair practices of distributing inheritance still prevails. Similarly, when women empower their own economy, they are once again being discriminated due to their lack of business skills. Somehow, they will communicate with middle traders who bought their products with lower costs than the market. Because of this situation, the incomes become less and women tend to quit the job.

Several studies have shown that in most societies, gender based norms make men granting access to resources, opportunities, rights to voices, and decision-making power more than women. Automatically, these practices put women in lower position in society rather than breadwinner in the family. There are many other factors that influence the status of women such as income, reproductive health, environmental and sociocultural constraints. Different countries may practice different culture; however, the status of women in society remains the same. Bradshaw (1995) listed three factors that contribute to the relative poverty of women which are women have fewer opportunities to transform work into income; have limited decision-making authority; and, when women make decisions, they tend to act for the benefit of others instead for themselves.

THE ENHANCEMENT SYSTEM ON DEVELOPING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

This section of the paper will look at three elements that contribute towards women's empowerment. The three elements are microfinance facility, education and legal aids.

a) *Microfinance*

World Bank addresses microfinance as system that enables poor women to become economic agents of change by increasing their income and productivity, access to markets and information, and decision-making power. Microfinance enhances the productivity of women's entrepreneurship and generates their income activities. According to Goetz and Gupta (1996), microfinance helps women increase their self-confidence and status within their families as well

as income that can be used to improve their families' well-being through improved health and nutrition for a long-term.

Mayoux (2000) highlights three recognized models of microfinance programmes:

1. Financial self-sustainability: Setting interest rates to cover costs, enabling separate accounting from other interventions, expanding programmes to obtain economies of scale and decreasing costs of delivery through the use of groups.
2. Poverty alleviation: Focuses on small savings, and loan provisions to aid in consumption and production.
3. Feminist empowerment: Focusing on gender equality and women's rights through microfinance, and empowering women economically and socially.

Based on a number of researches, microfinance can provide economic empowerment of women and to some extent also assist the process of social and legal empowerment. Through microfinance, women can expand their own business and being productive in marketing their products. It also increased their involvement in making decision for household's resources.

Research done by De Aghion and Morduch (2005) which conducted in Bangladesh, Latin America and Africa, showed that women tend to spend a resulting increase in their income on improving children's health and education to a larger extent than man do. It also means that microfinance helps women to have a greater control over household economic decisions. Another research conducted by Coleman (2006) and Ashraf et al. (2006) also look at issue to evaluate the effect of microfinance on women's economic empowerment. The result shows almost the same where women have the power to manage household resources. Women also experience greater income, and at the same time make a savings for long-term expenses.

However, Coleman (2006) also found the gender gap in the loan distribution schemes. For example, the management of the bank tends to give the loans to a group of women who are wealthier and have higher income. The purpose of the system becomes meaningless as the loans have not been delivered to the targeted group.

b) Education

The educational costs incur may influence some of the poorer to send their male children to the school rather than the females. The girls are often being told to stay at home, taking care of their younger sibling, or helping their mother to do housework. Moreover, they were restricted to travel long distance and live away from the family to gather knowledge in distance colleges because of personal security. This make it limited for the girls to get better education and it's resulted in the lack of necessary skills among female students since pre-schools.

To enhance the women's economic empowerment, education needs to deliver to the women and girls in earlier stage of schooling. Education has a potential to strengthen women's earnings possibilities and control of resources both inside and outside of the household. Knowledge made women know how to decide the best for their household and it resulted to greater satisfaction to women, hence, improving the women's empowerment in economy. Education can increase their self-esteem and their ability to change the household status.

Through several studies, it clearly showed that different situation of one household brings different treatment for women's education. For a wealthy household, they can manage to send their children to school, be it girls or boys. In contra, poor household can only manage to send their boys to school instead of girls.

c) Legal Aid

Legal aid programmes are more directly related to social and legal empowerment. However, legal aid may have different impact based on how educated the women is rather than men. Due to social and gender norms, men are likely to inherit most of the property left in inheritance cases. Women might have power to make decision regarding the resources of their household where the legal systems are implied. This situation clearly showed that legal aid may have effect but almost resulted indirectly towards women's empowerment. In most of divorce cases, the discrimination on women does exist although the law itself does not discriminate. It can be judged by social and cultural norms whereby men have more influence on the decision making instead of women.

Allendorf (2007) conducted research in Nepal which resulted that legal aid may have significant impact on women's empowerment. However, the result has greater impact between women who owned land and those who does not own land. The women who owned land have power to decide the resources of their household and they can send their children to school and give them a well-being life instead of those women who does not owned land. The status of women make legal aid can be performed better in making decision on socio economic factors.

Another research made by Rodriguez (2000) in Ecuador found that women who receive legal aid is more successful in court rather than those who does not receive legal aid. The legal aid programme is made and it was successfully helped more than 14,000 women and children to get evenly distribution of beneficiaries between legal aid and supplementary services. However, the programme fail to identify what would have happened to individuals helped if they have not received any help. Thus, the programme needs to investigate more deeply on how it can effect on women's empowerment.

DISCUSSION

Some challenges which faced by women nowadays, whether education or knowledge, vocational skills, labour burden, and decision making, are still bound to the social and culture practices within the society. Women can voice their rights and freedom of making decision, but, women often do those decision based on emotion. This caused the decision made by women to be partial. The power of making decision should come with broad knowledge of how does it effect in the future, thus, the decision often left to fill by men. This does not implicate that men always do the right decision but generally the society tends to let the important decision to be made by men.

The studies should have been made further in evaluating on how does microfinance, education, and legal aid can enhance the women's empowerment towards the changing of their status, be it self-esteem and self-confidence to make decision. There are so many holes in microfinance particularly on how effective it is to empower women, how it could generate the savings, or how it could made the decision making right. The effect of giving loans might help women to expand

themselves in the economy, however, the process of giving out those loans need to be evaluating and further and detailed information must be gathered.

Education also must be implemented to all gender without skipping any level of education systems to enhance the knowledge needed and prepared them for better opportunities. The government need to play important roles as to provide the necessary services to their citizens. However, based on social and gender norms, an educated women or men must always refer to their cultural, so that education would not be misused as a tools to ignore the basis of culture. Legal aid can be beneficial services to enhance women's empowerment. However, the participant must not being biases in dividing the inheritance.

CONCLUSION

This article is purposely to discuss the issues on how women's empowerment can enhance the economy not only within the family but in community of societies as well. The challenges faced by low income country in developing women's empowerment might have different impact based on cultural and social norms. Several studies which have been made also showed that there are different results based on status that women empower in their family. However, the studies does not compare on how it is related to the developing countries which practicing the same social and cultural norms. If the studies made in developing countries, is the result found would be same, whereas the same social and cultural norms are practiced or would it be differ. Women always being step behind the men in making decision of the household and on their income. Restricted by the gender norms, men would have definite decision on resources of their household, but the housework is still belonging to women rather than men. As a summary, women's empowerment can bring a lot of opportunities in improving the poor rate in the country. Women, who always involve in indirect industrial, need to be exposed with the opportunities to expand their small business into large markets. Good programmes must be made to realize this, so that women can involve in decision making and help to improve the economy of one country.

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