



Stitching toward empowerment: A case study of Tabiro Ladies' Club

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 June 2013

Received in revised form 21 September 2013

Accepted 11 October 2013

Keywords:

Empowerment
Co-operative
Uganda
Women
Economic benefits
Capacity development
Relational
Collective

ABSTRACT

In the developing world, women are more likely than men to work in poorly paid occupations in the informal sector. Women are responding to this inequality by forming and joining co-operatives. Women-only co-operatives offer members the opportunity for employment and empowerment through income generating opportunities and capacity building. A case study was conducted on an informal women-only embroidery handicraft co-operative located in the Mpigi District of Uganda to explore the relationship between co-operatives and empowerment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 members of the Tabiro Ladies' Club, in addition to key informant interviews, participant observation, and a feedback workshop. Members of the Tabiro Ladies' Club experienced empowerment at the personal, collective, and relational level. Empowerment effects that the women experienced included direct economic benefits, social capital and recognition, and capacity development. Hindrances included economic struggles within the household and the club and difficulties arose from being unregistered with the Ugandan government as a co-operative.

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1. Introduction

Women's entry into the paid labor force is one of the key advancements of women's rights and gender equality that occurred in the twentieth century (Aulette, Wittner, & Blakely, 2009). However, gender inequality in employment is highly prevalent in the developing world; even if women are employed, they are more likely to work in unpaid or poorly paid positions, including family agriculture or the informal sector (Revenge & Shetty, 2012). For this paper, informal sector refers to any work that generates an income that is not taxed or monitored by the government, including co-operatives that are not registered with the local or national government (Ellis, Manuel, & Blacken, 2006). For instance in Uganda, 75% of women who work in agriculture and 61% of non-agricultural women workers are self-employed and operate in the informal sector (Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBoS), 2007). The lack of access to better paid formal employment and the invisibility of work done in the informal sector not only affects women economically but also negatively affects their perceptions of themselves and their interactions with other individuals (Majulin, 2010). As Kabeer (1999) noted, "in a context where

cultural values constrain women's ability to make strategic life choices, structural inequalities cannot be addressed by individuals alone" (p. 457). Cultural values that constrain women's ability to make strategic life choices in Uganda range from lack of technical skills and networking opportunities that enable entry into the formal economy, lack of access to capital and land ownership to secure loans for investments in self-employment and training, or even traditional attitudes that subordinate working women as inferior to men who have the same qualifications (Ellis et al., 2006). One way that women are becoming empowered is through joining co-operatives to gain access to markets that otherwise would have been denied to them. Co-operative membership also provides women with access to opportunities for personal development and social support. This paper will explore how members of a women-only handicraft co-operative in Uganda have experienced empowerment.

Since the emergence of the feminist movement in development studies beginning in the early 1970s, discussion around women's work and women's empowerment received much attention due to the unequal economic and social positions women of developing countries face (Bay, 1982; Boserup, 1970; Chen, 2008). Women in Africa still live and work in a system that favors men over women, resulting in limited freedom due to socially constructed claims of women's 'natural inferiority' as the weaker sex (Hategekimana, 2011). Alongside this discriminatory approach are patronizing attitudes that, for example, position women's handicraft production not as creative economic production but rather as casual income generation. Handicraft based enterprises have offered

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women little enhancement in terms of power relations within the wider economy and society, argue some scholars (Nash, 1993). Is this situation, however, inevitable? This paper will consider if there could be opportunities for women to advance their human agency, interact and change social structures, and fulfill their life goals through income generation, creative expression and relationship building. More specifically, what might be the role of co-operatives for women's empowerment?

Co-operatives are a unique form of enterprise, as they combine economic dimensions with social and psychological dimensions to pursue and produce positive externalities for their members (Zamagni & Zamagni, 2010). Co-operatives provide the ability to experience empowerment as women improving their economic situation is one of the key components in gaining the ability to exercise control in their lives (Raheim & Bolden, 1995). Further, the social aspect of co-operatives adds the benefit of solidarity and unites women working together to gain and question power in a culture where that is not easy to do (International Labor Organization (ILO), 2012).

Women who participate in co-operatives, especially women-only co-operatives, can be subversive to the system of patriarchy as they gain increased access to capital and the potential for personal advancement (Raheim & Bolden, 1995). By gaining and participating economically and collectively with other women, it allows women an increased ability to make strategic life choices and question structural inequalities (Kabeer, 1999). However, this may be limited as many women-only co-operatives are in stereotypical female occupations, such as handicrafts, which have narrow markets that may constrain the possibility of economic benefit and visibility (Raheim & Bolden, 1995). Nevertheless, due to the patriarchal system entrenched in rural areas, women are often limited in their ability to outright shift their responsibilities from homemaker and assistant to the husband to formal employment (Flygare, 2006). Thus, handicrafts offer women the ability to work from home, yet participate in an economic activity to generate income (Flygare, 2006; Jones, Smith, & Wills, 2012; Le Mare, 2012). Furthermore, working within a handicraft co-operative offer women the ability to work collectively to gain empowerment and the ability to slowly shift cultural norms that placed them in an inferior position in the first place (Flygare, 2006; Le Mare, 2012).

With the recent growth of co-operatives in Uganda and the shift from government-controlled co-operatives to individual-owned co-operatives, women are seizing the opportunity to expand into this economic sector (ILO, 2012). While the growth of handicraft co-operatives in Uganda is much lower than agriculture or saving and credit co-operatives (SACCOs), it is a very important type to examine as it is pre-dominantly women who work in these co-operatives (Raheim & Bolden, 1995). It is important to explore whether women who participate in the traditionally female occupation of handicraft production experience empowerment similar to the experience of women members of other types of co-operatives (e.g., agricultural co-operatives or SACCOs) (ILO, 2012). Furthermore, by studying a co-operative that is not registered with the government, it will add to the discussion around women's work in the informal sector and the structural inequalities that women face and their response to it. Thus, it is important to learn how women are becoming empowered through joining co-operatives. It is access to markets that otherwise would have been denied to them? Or do co-operatives simply offer access to positive personal and social developments?

This paper seeks to understand how rural women in Uganda experience empowerment through their involvement in a co-operative using a unique case study of a women-only handicraft co-operative. How have members of this co-operative experienced empowerment individually through increased self-esteem and confidence? How does this co-operatives offer empowerment to its

members collectively within a social setting? How do its members experience empowerment in relationships with other members of society, including within their own households? This case study explores how members of a handicraft co-operative experience empowerment using an analysis that employs a feminist standpoint perspective that privileges women's own assessment of the impact they have experienced from the co-operative. Both theoretical and practical aspects of the relationship between gender, empowerment, and the co-operative movement are identified.

In particular, this case study recognizes that unregistered co-operatives have not been studied in the literature as often as registered co-operatives, most likely due to the difficulty of identifying such co-operatives. In East Africa, many co-operatives tend to cater to males, making women an underrepresented group in co-operatives (ILO, 2012). Thus, the lack of research on unregistered co-operatives, particularly women-only groups, creates an opportunity to explore their growing presence in Uganda and their impact on the lives of women. Furthermore, by investigating handicraft co-operatives, it allows exploration into whether or not involvement in a female-dominant occupation that does not stray from traditional gender roles can empower women.

The epistemological approach in this research is based on a feminist standpoint perspective, which explores the way gender influences ways of knowing and obtaining knowledge (Anderson, 2011). Feminist standpoint theory "claims an epistemic privilege over the character of gender relations, and of social and psychological phenomena in which gender is implicated, on behalf of the standpoint of women" (Anderson, 2011, online). Feminist standpoint "expresses women's experiences at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of social relations" (Hartsock, 2003, p. 304). Using this perspective, it is important to represent the experiences of women in the Tabiro Ladies' Club as they see it, using it to engage with the women to reflect on and extend their empowerment further (Maguire, 1987).

What is interesting is that Uganda is often held up in terms of a successful "case" of how structural adjustment policies and economic reforms can bring individuals out of poverty (Dijkstra & Van Donge, 2001). Therefore, by studying a women-only co-operative in Uganda, it will be able to shed light onto whether economic reforms have been able transfer to women and the informal sector, not just the male dominated formal sector. By taking a feminist standpoint theoretical perspective, this paper will be able to contribute a perspective and voice that is often not heard in policy arenas, hopefully leading to better long-term economic reforms for women and men in Uganda.

This paper begins with providing some insight into the current literature on empowerment and co-operatives, including a description of the analytical framework that will be used in the analysis of the data. After discussing the context and methodology of the study, the findings will be reported as they relate to the development of agency, economic and social benefits, the development of capacity, as well as the limitations to empowerment that can be experienced within an informal women's co-operative. The paper concludes with some directions for future research.

2. Background

The empowerment approach, which originated through Third World feminist and grassroots organizations, has the focus of exploring how women become self-reliant, rather than focusing on comparing women's position to men's (Shetty, 1991). Feminism has routinely taken an interest in women's work, how it is counted, and how it impacts women's lives. The feminist perspective has looked at the dynamics of oppression and is interested in both the

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