

**ENTERPRENEURSHIP, EMPOWERMENT AND THE IMPACT OF THE
DIMENSION OF FEMALE IDENTITY ON THE WOMEN INVOLVED IN
MICROCREDIT FINANCING SCHEMES: AN EMPIRICAL
INVESTIGATION IN IZMIR METROPOLITAN REGION**

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Abstract

This study fundamentally aims to problematize the very nature of changes on the Turkish women, particularly, in regard to their women identity from a perspective of empowerment in the aftermath of their involvement in the microcredit projects carried out in Western Turkey, namely, the western metropolitan center, Izmir. In order to be able to realize the given objective, the work shall present the quantative and qualitative findings of an empirical work of questionnaires and one to one interviews with 300 women with previous experience and involvement in microcredit financing schemes and projects facilitated through the governorship of Izmir and with the aid of a wide variety of nongovernmental organization within the metropolitan Izmir region. The empirical findings of the study shall also be supported with a qualitative analysis of the women's anecdotal stories in relation what micro financing credit schemes have brought about to their female identity along with other changes. Whilst carrying out the tasks, the empirical means have attempted to reveal information first on demographical and sociological background of the women involved in the sampling, subsequently in the second part, the dimensions related to the their women identity and its very relationship with the microcredit financing schemes. The third dimension of the empirical dimension has been to elaborate the factors that led these women to the entrepreneurship facilitated via microcredit financing schemes coupled with the lateral stages pursuing to shed light on how Turkish women perceive factors like

risk and self perception and in what ways they come to deal with their environment.

In the light of the empirical work carried out in metropolitan Izmir Region, the study shall italicize that women involvement in micro credit financing schemes brings about a strong consciousness about their female identity within a stronger sense of self perception, self confidence and cooperation with their female counterparts to solve their problems

Key Words: *micro credit financing, empowerment, female identity, NGO, Izmir metropolitan region*

JEL Classification:Z00, Z10, Z13

1. INTRODUCTION

This study fundamentally aims to problematize the very nature of changes on the Turkish women, particularly, in regard to their women identity in the aftermath of their involvement in the microcredit projects carried out in Western Turkey, namely, the western metropolitan center, Izmir. The relation to the female identity shall be elaborated within the empowerment perspective. Indeed the past-20 year-transformation that Turkey went through was an enormous one with many and a many political and economic repercussions. The transformation in question sometimes sited sometimes as “neoliberalism”or at times “structural transformation” has set forth the background against which micro credit financing schemes started to be implemented in urban poverty areas.

In order to be able to realize the given objective, the work shall present the qualitative findings of an empirical work of questionnaires and one to one interviews with 300 women with previous experience and involvement in microcredit financing schemes and projects facilitated through the governorship of Izmir and with the aid of a wide variety of nongovernmental organizations within the metropolitan Izmir region. The empirical findings of the study shall also be supported with a qualitative analysis of the women’s anecdotal stories in relation what micro financing credit schemes have brought about to their female identity along with other changes.

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In the light of the empirical work carried out in metropolitan Izmir Region, the study shall italicize that women involvement in micro credit financing schemes brings about a strong consciousness about their female identity within a stronger sense of self perception, self confidence and cooperation with their female counterparts to solve their problems, all culminating the growth of entrepreneurship on wide scale

2. A THEORETICAL REVIEW OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT AND MICRO CREDIT FINANCING SCHEMES IN REGARD TO GENDER FEMALE IDENTITY

2.1. Micro Credit Financing Schemes

Since the proposed study dwells on the relationship between entrepreneurship, micro credit financing schemes and female identity, our attempt is to understand the notion of 'empowerment' and elucidate the concept and its relationship with the empowerment strategies. Empowerment is an essential theoretical tool for the present change since changes in women identity *ipso* micro credit financing schemes have been inextricably linked to the notion of empowerment.

In an age of 'globalization and glocalization', microcredit projects have been a development tool and poverty reduction strategy. (Yunus,2003) In other words, microcredit can be merely thought to be the extension of microloans to those in poverty designed to spur entrepreneurship with giving a hand to those individuals who lack collateral, steady employment and a verifiable credit history and therefore cannot meet even the most minimal qualifications to gain access to traditional credit. (Yunus,2007) Fundamentally speaking, the term microcredit is used to describe the lending of small amounts of money to individuals who normally would not receive financial assistance from a traditional banking institution. (Ekpe et al , 2010)Therefore, the micro credit happens to be serving for the individuals located at the lower middle classes. Indeed, from the perspective of Turkish case of micro credit projects, the projects put into implementation have also been no different than the ones realized at other parts of the developing world.

As for the notion microcredit programs, microcredit is not entirely some brand new phenomenon, yet a part of microfinance, rather the provision of a wider range of financial services to the very poor. (Yunus, 2003) The origins of microcredit in its current practical incarnation can be linked to several organizations founded in Bangladesh, especially the Grameen Bank, (Yunus, 2007). Founded in 1976 by Muhammad Yunus and having steadily grown in international recognition and replication since its conception in the 1970's, The Grameen Bank, is generally considered the first modern microcredit institution (Ekpe et al , 2010). Beginning as an isolated experiment in Bangladesh, microcredit has transformed into an international phenomenon culminating in the receipt of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize by microcredit founder, Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank

2.2. Understanding the Link Between Entrepreneurship and Micro Credit Financing Schemes

An extensive amount of microcredit literature has diverted a great deal of interest on the existence of microfinance organizations in developing countries. The fact that developing countries come onto the stage of discussion is partly due to the neo liberal restructuring processes that have come to influence and shape the developing world in line with the prerogatives of the guardians of the global financial order such as IMF and the World Bank. On the other hand, changing strategies of the IMF and World Bank have been on the way to deal with the increasing poverty in those developing parts of the world, which revised the basic policies that the IMF and the World Bank were to follow in the second half of the first decade of 2000s. Henceforth, the macro setting behind the women entrepreneurs in the developing world is against a picture of poverty, forcing the women to relate themselves to these projects. As Gibson (2009:75) emphasizes,

Increasingly, it seems, it is the figure of woman that has emerged in 'third world countries' as the new subjects of development, the "desired beneficiaries and agents of progress. While near invisible within global and national scale debates about levelling the playing field and joining the global economy, at the local level women in poor urban and rural areas have become the targets of market-led approaches to local development. Women have been recruited into micro-credit schemes and micro- enterprise development projects upon which the hopes for poverty reduction and economic growth are pinned.

Ekpe et al. (2010) italicize a commonly and widely accepted finding that resources to credit female entrepreneurial activity are not easily accessible for

women entrepreneurs, mostly in developing countries, (Iganiga, 2008; Iheduru, 2002; Okpukpara, 2009), contrasted with the fact that the rate of women participation in the informal sector of the economy happens to be higher than males (Akanji, 2006; Akinyi, 2009). Inadequacy of capital to start or run business (Ibru, 2009; Lakwo, 2007) were factors that mobilized them to apply for micro-finance credits (Kuzilwa, 2005). In such respect, the objective of microcredit financing schemes has to do with relating of the women to the notion and practice of entrepreneurship. As Altay (2007, 6) notes:

The aim of this endeavour is to make women access financial services. Appropriate program design can have a strong, positive effect on women's empowerment, by giving women more chance about owning more assets, giving a more active role in family decisions, and increasing investment for the future of family well-being. Microfinance as an entry point for women is economic, social and political empowerment. It is presently promoted as an almost magic solution for women poverty. Innovative institutions and programs in Asia and Latin America, some operating as long as 40 years, have demonstrated that providing credit and savings services to the poor can be a powerful and efficient tool for poverty alleviation.

Again the perils of neoliberal transformation and the global transformation (Roomi & Parrot, 2008; Porter & Nagarajan, 2005) happened to be main culprits for the potential problems related the processes such as poverty, unemployment, low household and business income and inability to save (May, 2009; Otero, 1999). Another disadvantage that Ekpe et al report (Mkpado & Arene, 2007) is that savings are needed to protect income, act as a security for loan and could be re-invested in the business (Akanji, 2006).

One finding of international monitoring organizations has been such that Women entrepreneurs lack training, particularly, in developing countries (IFC, 2007) and according to Ekpe et al (2010), entrepreneurial process, a vital source of developing human capital possesses an essential role in providing learning opportunity for individuals to improve their skills, attitudes and abilities (Brana, 2008; Cheston & Kuhn, 2002; Shane, 2003).

Moreover, literature on micro credit financing schemes is far from dealing with and elaborating on the effect of training on women entrepreneurs' performance, especially in developing countries, Given the impact of poverty, low educational levels and other societal discriminations (Porter & Nagarajan, 2005; Roomi &

Parrot, 2008); training renders itself as very important micro-finance factor for women entrepreneurs as it would provide the skills and experience needed for business (Akanji, 2006, Cheston & Kuhn, 2002; Kuzilwa, 2005).

2.3 Paradigms of Gender Empowerment

As for the discussion of empowerment we need a clear cut definition of the term to go on with our discussion. Empowerment in feminist approaches can be defined as;

a process of internal change, or power within, augmentation of capabilities, or power to, and collective mobilization of women, and when possible men, or power with, to the purpose of questioning and changing the subordination connected with gender, or power over. Empowerment can range from personal empowerment that can exist within the existing social order. Thus this kind of empowerment would correspond to the right to make one's own choices, to increased autonomy and to control over economic resources. But self-confidence and self-esteem also play an essential role in change. (Swain RJ 2007,76)

Literature on gender empowerment juxtaposes as three key paradigms of contrasting views on the relationship between microfinance and empowerment namely; Feminist empowerment paradigm ; Financial self-sustainability paradigm;Poverty alleviation paradigm.¹

As for the paradigms in perspective, Ezasor and Ezasor (2010: 230) underline the fact that

Each paradigm has its own interpretation of concepts like 'sustainability' and 'participation' as well as its own priorities in microfinance delivery, complementary services and organizational structure. These different interpretations and priorities create underlying tension between supporters of the different paradigms, leading to obvious implications for the acceptance and adoption of empowerment approaches in MFIs.

¹ For an intensive discussion please refer to Deshumukh –Ranadive, Joy & Murthy, K. Ranjani. (2005). "Introduction: Linking the Triad." *Micro-Credit, Poverty and Empowerment Linking the Triad*. (pp. 31-60). Sage Publications: New Delhi.

2.3.1 Feminist Empowerment Paradigm

The feminist empowerment paradigm, rooted in the development of some of the earliest microfinance programs in the South, including the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, emphasises themes such as gender equality and women's human rights. (Ezasor and Ezasor and Ezaor, 2010,231) In such regard Microfinance is a tool promoted "*as an entry point in the context of a wider strategy for women's economic and socio-political empowerment that focuses on gender awareness and feminist organization*" (Ezasor and Ezasor and Ezaor, 2010,231).²

In the light of the basic highlights of the very paradigm microfinance must be :

- Part of a sectoral strategy aiming to realize changes oriented to locate "opportunities, constraints and bottlenecks within industries which, if addressed, can raise returns and prospects for large numbers of women." Linking women to existing services and infrastructure, developing new technology such as labor-saving food processing, building information networks, shifting to new markets, and policy level changes to overcome legislative barriers and unionization will be examples for possible policy action . (Ezasor and Ezasor and Ezaor, 2009,231)
- Based on participatory principles to build up incremental knowledge of industries and enable women to develop their strategies for change . (Ezasor and Ezasor, 2010,231)³

Ezasor and Ezasor (2010; 232-235) also note that this becomes a total social and political encompassing process including gender advocacy dimension;

² For a more detailed discussion on the theme please refer to the studies of Mayoux, Linda. (2005) "From Access to Empowerment: Gender Issues in Microfinance" and Mayoux, Linda. (2005) "The Magic Ingredient? Microfinance & Women's Empowerment".<http://www.gdrc.org/icm/wind/magic.html>. dated June 6th, 2011

³ See an expanded version of discussion theoretically enriched with concrete cases Mayoux, L. (1998), "Participatory Learning for Women's Empowerment in Microfinance Programmes: Negotiating Complexity, Conflict and Change", IDS Bulletin, 29(4), 39-50

Mayoux, L. (1999), "Questioning Virtuous Spirals: Microfinance and Women's Empowerment in Africa", Journal of International Development, 11(7), 957-84 and Ofreneo's work Ofreneo, R.P. (2006), "Problematizing Microfinance as an Empowerment Strategy for Women Living in Poverty: Some Policy Directions", Gender, Technology and Development Journal of the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Bangkok, Thailand, 3-12

Many organizations go further than interventions at the industry level to include gender-specific strategies for social and political empowerment. Some programs have developed very effective means for integrating gender awareness into programs and for organizing women and men to challenge and change gender discrimination. Some also have legal rights support for women and engage in gender advocacy. These interventions to increase social and political empowerment are seen as essential prerequisites for economic empowerment. Economic empowerment itself is defined in more than individualist terms to include issues such as property rights, changes intra-household relations and transformation of the macro-economic context.

2.3.2 Financial-Sustainability Paradigm

As the second paradigm of empowerment, The financial self-sustainability paradigm defines empowerment in individualist terms. The basic objective is to expand individual choice or capacity for self-reliance. In that respect the basic assumption of the paradigm is that increasing women's access to microfinance services shall yield to individual economic empowerment via enabling women's decisions about savings and credit use, enabling women to set up micro-enterprises, and increasing incomes under their control. The subsequent assumption follows that economic empowerment will bring forth increased well-being of women and also to social and political empowerment (Ezasor and Ezasor, 2010,233-4).

The basic objective of the program then becomes to create large programs that are profitable and fully self-supporting in competition with other private sector banking institutions. By this very token they will be able to raise funds from international financial markets without solely relying on funds from development agencies . hence target groups being the 'bankable poor': small entrepreneurs and farmers (Ezasor and Ezasor, 2010,233-4).

2.3.3. Poverty Alleviation Paradigm

As for the third paradigm; The poverty alleviation paradigm targets to encompass increasing capacities and choices and decreasing the vulnerability of poor people with concrete ramifications of developing sustainable livelihoods, community development and social service provisions like literacy, healthcare and infrastructure development. In such respect, the paradigm is not only concerned with reaching the poor, but also the poorest. The emphases have been laid on particularly on the importance of small savings and loan provisions for

consumption as well as production, group formation and the possible justification for some level of subsidy for programs working with particular client groups or in particular contexts . Some programs have developed effective methodologies for poverty targeting and/or operating in remote areas. (Ezasor and Ezasor, 2010,232).⁴

3. THE EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION IN IZMIR METROPOLITAN REGION: STRUCTURE; CONTENT AND PROCESS OF THE RESEARCH

3.1 Statement of the Basic Research Problem and Challenges Faced by the Study

The basic problematization of the study rests on the interrogation whether micro credit financing schemes have culminated in changes in regard to the women's identity rather than solely dwelling on the concrete changes to the women's lives. By means of reaching 300 women, who have been involved in microcredit schemes the res surveys were carried out. The channels that were utilized in reaching the target group were realized through public bodies' units located in the governorship of Izmir. The managers accompanied the researchers at certain days, for the interviews which also facilitated the accessibility of the researchers into the households of the women involved in the projects.

The greatest challenge confronted by this study has been the fact that most of the women involved in the Project have been migrant women coming from the South-eastern Turkey. Indeed most of the spouses of these women have not positively responded to these talks. Notwithstanding all these odds, the research had a chance to talk to each and every woman involved in the process.

3.2. Structure of the Study

The structure of the survey encompasses 6 fundamental parts:

⁴ A wide variety of micro financing examples of this study were analyzed including Otero, M. (1999). *Bringing development back into microfinance*. Latin America: ACCION International; Porter, E. G. & Nagarajan, K. V. (2005). Successful women entrepreneurs as pioneers: Results from a study conducted in Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India. *Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship*, 18 (1), 39-52. And Reavley, M. A. & Lituchy, T. R. (2008). Successful women entrepreneurs: A six-country analysis of self reported determinants of success-more than just dollars and cents. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business* , 5 (3-4), 272-296.

The first section attempts to reveal information on demographic and sociological characteristics on demographic and sociological traits. The section interrogates ethnical background, work experience, vocational education with eight items.

The second part of the questionnaire aims to get insights of different dimensions of female identity. Via a close scrutiny of the female identity, the study has the objective to elucidate the Notion of being a woman and the social female role which also enables the study to determine which personal traits have been emphasized in relation the female identity.

In the third part of the study, the research locates the ranking of the women in the family, number of siblings and sex of the siblings. The objective here is to find out whether factors compelling the women to entrepreneurship are hereditary or the factors related to the position of the women in their new families.

The fourth episode of the research aims to gain insights upon the first experience of women on their entrepreneurial activities, which also constitutes a new beginning for their lives. This part is essentially important in terms of determination about problems of female entrepreneurship in regard to the relationship of women with local administrations and their self confidence.

The fifth section of the research has asked women to express how they perceive certain concepts such as being courageous, risk-taking and self expression. The very interpretation of these concepts by these women will also aid us in explaining how women advocate entrepreneurship.

Finally sixth part shall assist the researcher to explain women's communication with the environment which has tremendous impact on entrepreneurship. In explaining and understanding the very theme, social personalities of the women, the impact of the former on the new work field, self confidence of women and self dominance of the women will be essentially important.

3.3. A Succinct Overview of Findings of the Study

Micro credit financing schemes have been geared to deal with the needs of the women located much below the middle income status groups, compelling women to get out out of the domestic sphere, thereby giving women a higher self esteem and self confidence. The study carried out reveals that women in Turkey have difficulties in adapting to the life outside, However in a system that emphasizes neighbour relations, this gets easier when women support each other and they can have higher self esteem and confidence. By means of having better material means, perceptions of the women on their gender identity change in line with

developments in their personality. However in a system that emphasizes neighbour relations, this becomes easier when women support each other and they can have higher self esteem and confidence. By means of having better material means, perceptions of the women on their gender identity change in line with developments in their personality.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study carried out in Izmir metropolitan region indicates that there has been a tremendous awareness of female identity at the subjects involved in the process. Yet micro credit financing schemes which have become very popular recently in the post-2000s in Turkey reveals another fact: The projects implemented so far have been designed under the Poverty Alleviation paradigm.

In such regard, the schemes were, at a policy level, parts of an integrated programme for poverty reduction for the poorest households. Indeed, by virtue of such a set up, the policy level prescriptions were mainly deemed as panacea for the question of poverty at the urban level. In the case of Turkish micro cosmos, most subjects were Kurdish women whose identity status has been more than problematic.

Given this token, the target groups have been identified as the under classes of urban poverty with tragic personal histories. In other words the poorest became the targets of policy programs. The inherent higher levels of female poverty and women's responsibility for household well-being become two justifications for the micro credit financing schemes.

Policy makers programmed the micro credit financing schemes in a paradigm in which interventionist poverty alleviation and community development priorities were set up *vis a vis* the problems faced. In realizing the given ends, programmes emphasized small savings and loan provision coupled with group formation for community development and devising methodologies for poverty targeting and/or operating in remote areas.

The focus of gender policy in Turkish micro credit financing schemes for the Turkish women in metropolitan regions become oriented to boost women's participation in self-help groups in which the term empowerment comes to be defined and explicated in terms of increased wellbeing, community development and self-sufficiency with the basic Assumption that women will be enabled to empower themselves by means of increased wellbeing and group formation.

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