MERIT RESEARCH JOURNALS
www.meritresearchjournals.org

Merit Research Journal of Art, Social Science and Humanities (ISSN: 2350-2258) Vol. 2(7) pp. 095-100, September, 2014
Available online http://www.meritresearchjournals.org/assh/index.htm

Original Research Article

Gender relations in utilisation micro finance resources among women in Kiharu Constituency, Murang'a County, Kenya

***Pauline W. Kamau, Elishiba Kimani and Grace Wamue-Ngare**

Department of Gender and Development Studies, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

***Corresponding Author's E-mail: wangarikamau@yahoo.co.uk**

Abstract

This paper explores gender relations in utilisation of microfinance resources. Focusing on women in Kiharu Constituency, Murang'a County in Kenya, the paper argues that micro finance resources play an important role in economic development and reduction of poverty globally. They target the poor, a majority of who are women, through provision of credit services. In Kenya, microfinance institutions contribute 80% Gross Domestic Product (GOK, 2010). This shows the sector has an important role to play in economic growth of the country with the capacity to address financial needs of the poor population. However, in spite of the high contribution of the sector to country's economy, there is still a problem with women utilizing these resources. The reasons for these are varied, among them gender relations between men and women, in a complex household situation in Kenya. These include women's marital status, the level of formal education; Gender based violence, poverty levels and lack of decision-making power of women at household levels among women who have accessed resources. Again, societies in Kenya are patriarchal, and as such, men are considered as power 'brokers' in households. This means that gender relations at household level impinge on economic outcomes in multiple ways. Using case study, this paper set the overall objective as to explore gender relations in utilization of micro finance resources among women in Kiharu Constituency, Murang'a County, Kenya.

Keywords: Gender, microfinance resources, micro finance institutions, patriarchy second in command.

INTRODUCTION

Provision of microfinance services is an important world-wide strategy for ensuring sustainability of livelihoods amongst the poor through credit provision. In Africa, the contemporary microfinance services, initiated by Mohamed Yunus and others in 1970s have brought easy, affordable and accessible finance opportunities and resources to the poor. In what is referred to as Grameen model, based on mutual trust and peer pressure women participate in groups for access, savings and repayment of loans in micro finance institutions. Arguably, Grameen Bank lending model has inspired many African countries with its friendly microfinance systems and it has been adopted to address poverty and women empowerment in a number of countries such as Kenya, Ghana, Uganda and Tanzania. In Kenya, contemporary microfinance was introduced through the International Labour Organisation

(ILO) Paper on Informal Sector in 1972, (Odhiambo, 1985). The objective of this Paper was to address poverty and economic empowerment among the poor, the majority being women. MFIs thereafter were set up in many low-income areas, for instance, informal urban settlements and rural areas. A pioneer MFI in Kenya is the Kenya Rural Enterprise Programme (K-Rep) that targeted women groups in the early 1980s. Reports from Consultative Group to Address the Poor - CGAP (2005) indicate that K-Rep Development Agency had over 50, 000 clients, of whom more than 59% were women from poor rural areas during this period. However, Kenya Women Finance Trust (KWFT) is the largest MFI in Kenya that is providing financial services to almost 600, 000 women (KWFT, 2011), and currently standing at 900,000. KWFT was established in 1981 to enable women access financial resources.

The presence of MFIs in Murang'a County date back to as early as 1980s. Kiharu Constituency in Murang'a County is now served by major MFIs, namely K-Rep, KWFT, Faulu, Kadet, Rafiki, SMEP and Kenya Ecumenical Loan Fund. Other more localised institutions include Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies, such as Unaitas formerly Muramati, Murata, Vision, Women Enterprise Fund, besides major national banks such as Barclays, Kenya Commercial and Cooperative, to name just a few. Unlike the banks, MFIs do not require formal collateral for example land title deeds in accessing resources. However, they expect women to pledge household assets as collateral to access resources. Like many other parts of Kenya, inhabitants of Kiharu Constituency are patriarchal. As such, men are considered not only the owners but also in control of household property. By asking women to pledge such assets, often put them in direct collision with their spouses who outrightly denied them security to obtain resources. Women, therefore, lack the means badly needed to participate in the MFI group lending model, a move that curtails them from benefiting fully from MFIs, despite lending institutions' "collateral free" incentive. In addition, their spouses are expected to sign the loan form as guarantee for repayment. Again, gender relations and customs at household levels; demand access of household resources and income be regulated through marriage and the family gender division of labour, which is dependent on ownership and management. In such cases, women are expected to disclose to their spouses all incomereceived from whatever source, micro finance resources being no exception. Evidently, gender relations in householdsmilitate against women's realisation of full benefits of MFIs despite their enormous participation. This renders the whole purpose of MFIs in poverty reduction, ineffective. Although poverty is notsynonymous with any gender, women are more vulnerable than men. Gender relations governing access of resources within the household catalyse their vulnerability. However, by strengthening women's position and building confidence, gender relations in householdscould be improved and theirparticipation in decision-making increased. It is in this context that this paper seeks to determine the extent to which gender relations have limited access to and control of microfinance resources by women, but also how they have contributed to poverty. It attemps to respond to this general question:

What factors influence utilisation of microfinance resources by women in Kiharu Constituency?

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The paper addresses the gender relations in utilization of microfinance resources in Kiharu, Murang'a County (which comprises of Kiharu, Kangema, Kigumo, Kandara, Maragua and Mathioya constituencies). Kiharu constituency was purposefully selected due to the fact that it is an area with very high concentration of MFIs, the home of the fastest growing microfinance Bank in Kenya, Equity Bank. Data was obtained from two locations of Kiharu Constituency, Murarandia and Mugoiri. These were randomly selected to give each of the six locations in the Constituency an equal chance of being selected, since all have similar characteristics. Women beneficiaries, who had accessed resources, were selected randomly from MFI records. The respondents included both men (spouses) of women beneficiaries, women and microfinance officers, totaling to a sample of 140. Data was collected by the use of interview guides, self-administered questionnaires, and Focused Group Discussions. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted particularly to key informants - microfinance officers. In addition, secondary sources have been used.

Theoretical concepts

Gender relations are situations where there are clear division and hierarchical power between men and women and this situation disadvantages women. The household is the basic unit of society where individuals confront and reproduce societal norms, values, power and privilege. It is the central place where children first learn about the roles connected to gender, and where power relations built around gender are located (Narayan et, al. , 2000). More specifically, gender norms in households, are reinforced and reflected in the larger institutions of the society. While explaining this situation, Blumberg presents Feminist Conflict Theory (1984), where sheobserves thatgender stratification is driven by the degree to which men and women control means of production and allocation of economic benefits. The tenets of this theory postulate that stratified societies have strata of gender prescribed social roles. These are interpreted as the expected behaviours for men and women in order to fit in society. Both men and women are required to adhere to certain social norms, values and beliefs upheld by the society as the governing ideology. The adherence to this expectation on women by the society shapes their perceptions and in many instances, limits them in activities viewed as men only. These perceptions include the view that women are not breadwinners but rather homemakers. The Theory also suggests that roles at family levels are based on gender relations that in turn dictate utilisation of resources. In Kiharu, women and men in the society have gender roles allocated to them, which they should conform to in relation to utilisation of any resources within the household. These gender roles stipulate that men are the head of households and they have power to dictate when their female spouses should utilise any resources. Blood and Wolfe (1960) agree with this assertion, while arguing that power is apportioned between husbands and wives, based on valued resource that each contributes to the family. The above authors suggest that gender relations in a household are based on an intricate relationship between power and resources one contributes. Again, the gender stratification system as stipulated by Blumberg rests on the premise that women are economically dependent on men, and that their contribution to family resources is minimal, hence less powerful. As such, men gain power in the household because they have easier access to factors of production than women, as the society has conferred power on them. On the other hand, women are not able to utilise resources because of a number of reasons.The patriarchal culture of Kikuyu community does not confer such power to control and utilise means of production on women. Evidently, factors of production in possession of men influence access to microfinance resources and in turn the power to utilise them. Arguably, if women are able to access and utilise resources from their participation in microfinance activities, they are likely to change gender relations in households.

Gender and utilization of resources

The balance of power in most households reflects the concept of separate spheres in conventional marital contracts. These contracts consist of cultural understandings of reciprocal rights and obligations of each spouse within a household (Sweetman, 2001). In essence, power is consolidated and institutionalized through a socialization process. This ensures that men and women are aware of the power that each possesses in the community. Wood (2011) emphasises that gender relations and participation of women in decision-making is spelt out and engraved in their prevailing culture. Again, in patrilineal societies, the socialisation process has been used to shape and entrench gender differences between boys and girls right from birth. In Kikuyu and African communities, boys and girls are raised differently. Girls are socialised to help their mothers by taking household chores and care for younger children. Boys, on the other hand, are given roles that assist their fathers, helping in productive activities that bring income. This, as stated previously, suggests that women's work is not productive rather, reproductive with no monetary value (income). Men are allocated power in terms of hierarchy, and according to their gender, and once assigned; they are expected to utilise it accordingly (Spade and Valentine, 2011).

Pearson et al., (1984) also emphasize that gender roles give prominence to the connectedness of men's and women's lives, and to the imbalances of power embedded in male-female relations. Arguably, Kiharu is a typical example of the above, as the community is highly patriarchal. Men dominate power and dictate how resources in the household ought to be utilised. In addition, gender relations and customs at the household level; demand that control and utilisation of household resources and income be regulated through marriage and the family gender division of labour, which is dependent on ownership and management (Kershaw, 1975). In such cases, women are expected to disclose to their spouses all income received from whatever source, microfinance resources being no exception (Sweetman, 2001). Evidently, gender relations in utilisation of household resources militate against women's realisation of full benefits of MFIs despite their enormous participation in them. This renders the whole purpose of MFIs in poverty reduction, ineffective. Again, the poverty level in developing countries is a challenge which has been compounded by prescribed gender roles within societies that subordinate women, making them vulnerable to poverty (March and Lopez, 1990). Although poverty is not synonymous with any gender, women are more vulnerable than men. As such, gender relations governing utilisation of micro finance resources within the household catalyse their vulnerability. Sweetman (2001) again states that in most societies in Africa men make decisions on utilization of micro finance resources availed or earned by women. March and Lopez (1990), too concede that men dominate women in all aspects of life, including, the number of children a woman should bear. Arguably, men are not only entitled to decision-making power within the family, but also allocate tasks, and utilization of resources at the household level. As such, women are not allowed to spend any income without the authority from men. In many societies in Africa and Kenya, women are expected to declare and bring home any income earned to their husbands including that of microfinance for necessary allocation and utilization (March and Lopez, ibid).

Admittedly, gender relations in the study area required looking into a wide range of institutions, which apportioned power to men and women. These included the household/family and community social systems. Again, traditionally Kikuyu women are excluded from decision-making forums and their participation in spheres where money issues are addressed is circumscribed. They are deemed *'incapable of making decisions'* and have no role to effect change in institutions that perpetuate gender inequality (Kabira et al., 1994). As Brehm and Kassin, (1996) put it, gender roles and societal expectations influence the way in which men and women, think, feel, respond, and react to the outside world. Wood (2011) asserts that religion and culture also have a role to play in apportioning power to men in the households. Thus, men take control of resources and decide on their utilisation in households. In essence, full utilisation and use of resources from microfinance, is therefore determined at household level where the family is crucial in distribution. Thus, women and young female adults in household are presumably represented by the husband and/or father, respectively, and are excluded customarily from participation in any decision-making on issues concerning finance, in the family and those of public nature.

In addition, gender roles among African societies, including the Kikuyu are affected by the rites of passage, which shape and institutionalize gender relations in households. A rite of passage through initiation or other means is meant to help young men and women transit smoothly from childhood into adulthood. The dominant male ideology is entrenched into young adults during this rite, which has always played a central role in socialization, demarking the different stages in an individual's development, as well as position in the broader community. Spade and Valentine (2011) state that in many societies in Africa, adulthood rites are done at the onset of puberty and are used to ensure proper shaping of responsible, productive and community-oriented adults. Ideally, the purpose of initiation is education, and this has an impact on gender division of labour and gender relations in household. Young adults learn norms and expectations of their community, which prepares them for future roles, especially expectations within marriage.

In Kiharu, circumcision for boys and alternative rites for girls has been a ritual expected to prepare them for the roles they play as adults in society. Young people are inducted into the roles where men are the breadwinners and women homemakers. This has been traditional informal educational system during initiation, which has slowly been replaced by formal education. However, the Kikuyu community still observes these rites of passage, which means that apart from cultural traditions, there are other factors that come into play in transforming gender relations in households (Spade and Valentine, ibid).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Gender relations in Kiharu dictate utilization of micro finance resources. It is quite clear that men have power over women n decision-making in households. As a result, women have had to contend with the prevailing gender division of labour in households and in so far as microfinance resources are concerned. It is important to note that regardless of this notion, women in Kiharu have managed to overcome patriarchy to participate in the sector without spousal coercion. However, there are major factors that influence utilization of these resources as presented by this paper.

Marital status of women beneficiaries

Marital status influenced decision-making in utilisation of resources. The women interviewed felt that men had power over women because of '*payment of bride wealth during marriage*, hence they were expected to seek spousal consent to utilise resources from MFIs. It was further established from the same women that even in marriage relations where no bride wealth was paid for whatever reason, men remain more powerful than women because of cultural discourse that bestow them such power. Consequently, married women have to obey their spouses and consult them in all decisions, including utilisation of resources from MFIs. This means that gender relations favour men in utilisation of micro finance resources. On the contrary, interviews with widows, divorced, separated and single women revealed that as sole breadwinners in their families, they had power to make decisions on utilisation of resources accessed from MFIs. The findings contradict (March and Lopez, 1990) study, which observes that widowed women consult their first-born sons on utilisation as the *bona fide* head of households upon the death of male spouses.

Formal education level of women beneficiaries

Another factor found to have had influence on the way women utilised microfinance resources was formal education level. This gave advantage to the women with high education level, as they had access to information and self-assertiveness to negotiate with their spouses how to utilise resources from MFIs. Formal education level, therefore, positively affected gender relations in households, as women are able to make decisions on utilisation of MFI resources.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence was found to influence not only control, but also utilisation of microfinance resources accessed by women. The women respondents revealed that their spouses violated them for utilising the resources from MFIs without their consent. Affirming the same, women discussants in FGD conceded that they had experienced gender-based violence from spouses for utilising MFI resources without consulting them. As such, women had to get express permission from male spouses to utilise resources from MFIs. This revealed that gender relations in household favoured male spouses in utilisation of microfinance resources. On the contrary, the chiefs conceded that there was a paradigm shift in gender-based violence in the study area, and women were also violating their spouses in their efforts to utilise their MFI resources. Gender-based violence in the area seemed to be changing its face as women counter violence from husbands. The women were fighting back to repress spousal violence.

Poverty levels among women beneficiaries

Poverty levels among women were found to have had an influence on the utilisation of MFI resources accessed by women. Among the women interviewed, 9% with a frequency of 21 conceded that they utilised resources from MFIs for needs other than the ones intended in the loan agreement due to poverty. As such, high levels of poverty at household levels led women to utilise resources to meet other needs. Consequently, they defaulted on the MFI resources, since their businesses were not able to pay back the loan due to under-capitalisation. This agrees with (Duxbury and Higgins, 1991) observations that women have fewer options than men in achieving utilisation of resources due to poverty and their competing roles and family demands. Gender roles and relations at household levels demand women meet domestic needs first in utilisation of resources, before investing in business enterprises.

Lack of decision-making power of women at household levels

Spouses who were interviewed revealed that women should not have decision-making power in utilisation of resources. This was represented by 66.7% of spouses who conceded that men should have more power than women in utilisation of resources, as compared to 33.3% who agreed that both genders should have equal power. Therefore traditions and culture allocate power to men; as such gender relations in decision-making in utilisation of all resources are culturally determined. Green (2008) in his study also confirms that women lack decision-making power in households in resource utilisation.

Patriarchy

During interviews with the women, most of them conceded that men consider themselves as head of households, who should be consulted at all times in decision-making by women. This means that men, as heads of households, are the ultimate decision makers in utilisation of resources. This was also confirmed in the FGD that patriarchal culture was being used to discriminate women and deny them power to make decisions on utilisation of resources accessed from MFIs in household. These findings support (Wamue and Njoroge, 2011) who assert in their study titled "Gender Paradigm Shift within the Family Structure in Kiambu" that African family is organised along gender relations that stem from patriarchy. Considering that patriarchy places men as heads of households, existing gender relations demand that women cannot make decisions on utilisation of resources without referring to them.

CONCLUSION

Microfinance institutions have helped fill in the gap of offering resources to people who are unable to obtain conventional loan from commercial banks. Access to resources enables men and women improve their businesses and increase their cash inflow, develop entrepreneurship skills, which consequently lead to the overall development of a country's economy. In Kenya, MFIs play a significant role in poverty reduction and improvement of standards of living. Women have been able to access resources, which have enabled them meet their basic needs in the households, through utilization of resources, as well as gaining economic empowerment. Economic empowerment has translated into improved gender relations, as women are able to negotiate power in households with the resources they bring to the family. However, women face insurmountable roadblocks in their endeavour to address gender relations in utilization of microfinance resources, in a patriarchal system, which believes decision-making is a preserve for men. The societal beliefs and perceptions on gender relations in households accord men control and authority over women as 'perceived' heads of households. These perceptions hinder women's utilization of their own resources from MFIs. As such, gender relations in households are dependent on perception and patriarchal nature of the society. Socio-cultural expectations, specifically marital status and gender-based violence militate against women's utilisation resources, which impacts on gender relations in households, with women being negatively affected. Also, age and the level of formal education, poverty and level of decision-making power in households influence utilization of microfinance resources in Kiharu.

REFERENCES

Blood R, Wolfe D (1960). *Husbands and Wives: The Dynamics of Married Living*. New York: Free Press.
Blumberg L (1984). *A General Theory of Gender Stratification*. New

York: Jossey-Bass.
Brehm S, Kassim S (1996). *Social Psychology.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
Duxbury L, Higgins C, Lee C, Mills S (1991). *Balancing work and family: A Study of Canadian Public Sector.* Ottawa: Department of Health and Welfare Canada.
GOK (2010), Economic Survey Nairobi. Government Printers.
Green D (2008). *From Poverty to Power.* London: Oxfam Publication
Kabira WM, Mashinjila M, Mbugua W (1994). *Delusions, Essays on Social Construction of Gender.*Nairobi: FEMNET.
Kershaw G (1975).*The Changing Roles of Men and Women in the Kikuyu Family Socio-Economic Strata in Rural Africana*, no 29, Winter.
Narayan D, Patel J, Schafft K, Rademacher A, Shulte S (2000). *Voices of the Poor. Can Anyone Hear Us?* New York: Oxford UniversityPress for World Bank,
Pearson R, Whitehead R, Young A (1984). Continuing Subordination of Women in Development Process in Young, A., Wolkovitz, B., and McCullagh, R., in *Marriage and the Market*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
Spade J, Valentine C (2011). *The Kaleidoscope of Gender: Prisms, Patterns and Possibilities.* New Delhi: Pine Forge Press and Sage.
Sweetman C (Ed) (2001). Gender, Development and Money**:** London, UK. Oxfam Publication.
Wamue, G. and Njoroge, N. (2011). Gender Paradigm Shift Within the Family Structure in Kiambu, Kenya. *Afr. J. Soc. Sci.,* 1 (3) 10- 20.
Wood J (2011). *Gendered Lives Communication, Gender and Culture.* Boston: Wadsworth Publishers.