Gender relations in access to microfinance resources among women in Kiharu constituency, Murang’a County, Kenya
Full Length Research Paper

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Pauline W. Kamau, Elishiba Kimani, and Grace Wamue-Ngare
Department of Gender and Development Studies, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

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This paper explores gender relations in access and control 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, the number of women accessing and controlling these resources is still low. The reasons for these are varied, among them gender relations between men and women, in a complex household situation in Kenya. These include age, women’s marital status, the level of formal education and number of children depending on women the division of labour, gender based violence, perceptions of men and women and religion also influence gender relations control of resources 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 access to micro finance resources among women in Kiharu Constituency, Murang’a County, Kenya.

Key words: Assets, collaterals, gender, microfinance resources, micro finance institutions, patriarchy second in command.

INTRODUCTION

Provision of microfinance services is an important worldwide 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). 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 householdsmitigate 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 not synonymous 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 households could be improved and their participation 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 attempts to respond to this general question:

What factors influence access to and control of microfinance resources by women in Kiharu Constituency?

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The paper addresses the gender relations in access to and microfinance resources in Kiharu, Murang’a County (the new administrative boundaries of Counties, which comprises of Kiharu, Kangema, Kigumo, Kandara, Maragua and Mathioya). 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 Mugoir. 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 128. 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 (Narayanan 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 she observes that gender 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 access to and control of
resources. In Kiharu, women and men in the society have gender roles allocated to them, which they should conform to in relation to access and control 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 access any resources. Blood & 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 access resources because of a number of reasons. For instance, men have power to control means of production such as land and household assets to access resources. The patriarchal culture of Gikuyu community does not confer such power to control means of production on women. Evidently, factors of production in possession of men influence access to microfinance resources for economic power. Consequently, women’s access to economic power lies in their ability to control factors of production that enable them access MFI resources. Arguably, if women are to get resources from their participation in microfinance activities, they are likely to change gender relations in households.

Women access to and control of microfinance resources
Women in Kenya and Kiharu in particular, make significant contribution to household income and to the County’s economy through microfinance resources. Although Kiharu Constituency has over 27% people living below poverty line, majority of who are women, statistics show that more than half of those engaged in MFIs are women (GOK, 2010). This means that given the well-recognized role of microfinance as a means of poverty alleviation, women have taken this advantage to join the sector to improve their incomes and consequently enhance economic development. It also confirms the importance of microfinance in the improvement of household economic welfare. However, (Sweetman, 2001) argues that the patriarchal nature of African communities hinders women from making substantial financial investments as compared to men. Men are able to access large amounts of finances from financial institutions using land title deeds acquired through inheritance. Lack of access to means of production inhibits women from accessing resources, thereby denying them participation in mainstream financial institutions. This limits their ability to earn high incomes in microfinance sector, which could improve their economic empowerment and independence, which in return could help women improve gender relations in the households. Nevertheless, for women to participate fully in microfinance sector, policies and laws that enable them to access resources without stringent requirements should put in place.

Again, patriarchy has been a major barrier to women empowerment in Kenya. In Kiharu too, patriarchal system has been institutionalized through socialization process, where women know that men make all decisions within a household. Girls are socialized to take domestic roles, which prepare them for marriage, whereas boys take up roles that emphasize leadership. The community belief in Kiharu is that by virtue of men paying bride price in marriage, women’s are subordinate and they should depend on male spouses, who automatically are the breadwinners. In African societies, including the Kikuyu community, marriage, means that a woman has to obey her husband (Kabira et al, 1994). Besides, she is required to surrender any resources accessed or any productive engagement that brings income (March and Lopez, 1990). This action strengthens male power rather than improve women’s socio-economic status. As such, women may find themselves powerless despite accessing extra resources from Microfinance institutions. Contemporary analysis places a distinction between breadwinner and mothering including gender roles in each case. Conversely, gender activities mark the difference between men and women in households, as well as the powers each has regarding decision-making. There is notion that women do not have control over the resources they make hence their survival and stability depends on the goodwill of their husbands, fathers or sons and they have less power to determine expenses in households. For example, no matter the kind of relationship a woman has with her spouse, she is expected to fit into his vision and do whatever she is commanded to. In some cases, this involves surrendering control of all resources; being confined at home, submission, lack of power or freedom to choose, and inability to defy their spouse. Indeed, empowerment means ability to earn and control income but, in some contexts, this entails women giving up some kind of power relations and status to achieve this (IDS, 1998). The gender disparity in control of microfinance resources is attributed to many factors, which include attitudes towards women in terms of knowledge and skills, types of enterprises they engage in and other socio-cultural related factors. Education and training play a key role in determining the enterprises women engage in. According to (UNESCO/ Kenya, 1991), the imbalance in formal education between men and women began with the restrictive colonial practices and continued to and beyond.
independence. The imbalances created have continued to secondary and university levels, despite Government efforts to ensure that women receive education and training, and this has a role to play in control of resources at household levels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
Gender relations in Kiharu dictate access to and control of microfinance resources. It is quite clear that men have power over women in 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 access to and control of these resources as presented by this paper.

Age of women
This plays a key role in access to resources. MFIs give resources to women who are 18 years and above, since the national identity cards were a requirement. MFIs officers confirmed this, noting that the national identity card was useful for purposes of identifying beneficiaries and also in tracking loan defaulters. MFIs also prefer to offer services to older women, above 35 years, because they are assumed to have the relevant experiences in business enterprises, are mature and have a high possibility of repaying loans. An MFI officer confirmed to the study that this category of women “are dependable since they are settled in their homes, as compared to young women who are likely to get married and move away with their spouses”. This made married women trustworthy in MFI resource access. MFI officers further revealed that the upper age limit of women accessing loans is 60. According to them, women above this age are unable to run businesses successfully, because of age factor. In control of resources, young women pointed out that their parents demand resources from them saying they were too young to handle resources.

Marital status of women
This is a strong determinant of access to MFI resources. The study revealed that single women were viewed as possible defaulters since they were thought to more likely relocate upon marriage, unlike the married ones. Again, in support of marital status as a factor that influenced access to resources from MFIs, 66. 7% of women respondents informed the study that they had to get permission from their spouses before applying for loans from MFIs. Nonetheless, 9 out of 15 widowed women also revealed that they do not seek consent from male relatives, as traditionally expected. They had power to decide on when to access microfinance resources without consultation. Again, women reported that spouses do not allow them to control any resources, whether from MFIs or otherwise. On the other hand, the widowed, separated and divorced revealed they control all their resources. With the absence of a male head of household, they are the final decision makers on control of MFI resources in families. This portrays that male spouses highly influence gender relations in their favour at households.

Level of formal education
The level of formal education of individuals determines the readiness to accept new ideas, as well as enabling women and men to make decisions at household levels. Discussion with women beneficiaries revealed that 53% of those with secondary education and above had utilised their formal education to make decisions regarding access to resources. They confirmed that this was made possible because they were able to access appropriate information about MFI services. To this effect, two women respondents confessed their level of education helped them gather information on available microfinance services, which helped them access resources from more than one MFI. Other women confirmed that formal education enabled them to access information from media and social networks for innovative business ideas, which helped in setting up enterprises that increased their household incomes. In contrast, the study established that women with no formal education and those with primary education had limited access to information, hence did not have diverse and innovative ideas like their counterparts. Again, the women confirmed that formal education gave them self-confidence to question gender relations, negotiate and engage their spouses to be allowed to control their resources, and they had reciprocated.

Lack of assets for collateral
Availability of household assets indicates capabilities of women to access resources from MFIs. MFIs demanded certain forms of collateral from women who wanted to access resources. These assets were in form of household goods equivalent to the principal value of the loan. These include furniture, electronics, cookers, sewing/knitting machines, and domestic animals. The value of assets is an important aspect in accessing resources. Women interviewed lamented that they found it difficult to access MFIs resources because they do not own assets, as most of them belong to their husbands. This implies that male supremacy in assets ownership brings in gender discrimination against women in as far as access to resources from MFIs is concerned. This affects not only gender relations, but also women’s decision-making power in families, since they have to seek permission from their spouses to use household assets as collateral to access resources from MFIs. Young single women, living with their parents, were
unable to access resources because of lack of assets. They confessed that being young and single, they had to contend with using their parents’ assets, and denial meant they were unable to access resources. The widowed also disclosed that though they had assets, MFIs required them to sign affidavits for their verification. MFI officers confirmed that this is done to ensure the assets belong to them, and not other family members. This portrays that in African culture, marriage spells out the power of ownership of property and gender relations in families. This then implies that in the absence of a male spouse, women’s ownership to family assets is questionable. This is an indicator that gender relations in households militate against access of resources by women in all categories.

**Signatures requirement as security guarantee for the loan**

In addition to pledging assets, MFIs require women to have their loan forms signed by spouses, chiefs and group members. The women who had accessed resources affirmed that spousal and chief’s signatures were a requirement in accessing resources from MFIs. Again, all women were expected to get group members and advocate’s signatures before accessing resources from MFIs. Expectation from MFIs that women get signatures before accessing resources implies that patriarchy is engrained in MFIs’ policies. This defines the lower position of women in relation to that of male spouses in households, which portrayed that gender relations favour men at all levels. As such, male spouses had the power to deny women the chance of accessing resources.

In addition, the following influenced control of resources in the household:

**Gender-based violence (GBV)**

GBV was reported in Kiharu in control of resources. The women beneficiaries confessed that their spouses demanded MFIs resources to decide on how best to utilise them. Those who did not surrender the resources reported that they experienced gender-based violence from their spouses. A total of 54 women beneficiaries confirmed that men beat their wives when they do not surrender MFI resources to them for control. The women respondents further confirmed spouses view MFI resources as a challenge to male power, hence the use of violence in households. This means that women whose spouses were violent made them lose control over the resources they had accessed from MFIs. This showed that marital status makes women become assets of men, and that they are forced to surrender resources through violence, confirming that gender relations favour men in households. Contrary to women arguing men violate them, the Chiefs in the area confirmed that women too violate men when they demand resources. This is an indication that microfinance resources were changing gender relations in households.

**Perceptions of men and women**

This hinder women from making substantial decisions without the involvement of men, perceived as heads of households. The study revealed that 47.6% of the spouses interviewed felt that men should have power to control resources from MFIs. Women respondents conceded that men are the decision-makers in the households as one stated, “Women should let their spouses control their resources for harmony in households. After all they are the head of households”. This reveals that the patriarchal nature of African community expects male spouses to make decisions on control of resources from MFIs on behalf of the women. This is an indicator that gender relations in households in Kiharu are very much dependent on perception of men and women, as well as the patriarchal nature of society.

**Religion**

This was found to influence women’s control of MFI resources in households. The women respondents confirmed that spouses use religion to deny them power in decision-making on control of resources in households, including those from MFIs. This had an effect on gender relations, since men are controllers of resources in households. One male spouse asserted, “women should always allow men to control all resources including monies in accordance to the Bible”, which states that a man is the head of a woman. It is then not a wonder that religion has a role to play in apportioning power to men in households in control of resources.

**CONCLUSION**

Micro-finance 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, 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 access to and control 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 access to and control of their own resources from MFIs. As such, gender relations in households are dependent on perception and patriarchal nature of the society. In patriarchal societies, such as Kiharu, women do not own substantive assets, as ownership is bestowed on men, hence women rely on their spouses or parents to enable them obtain assets to access microfinance resources. Further, socio-cultural expectations, specifically marital status, religion and gender-based violence militate against women’s access and control of resources, which impacts on gender relations in households, with women being negatively affected. Also, age and the level of formal education influence access to and control of microfinance resources in Kiharu.

REFERENCES