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The Contribution of Women Organizations to the Economic Empowerment of Craftswomen: Case Study of The National Association of Women Organizations in Uganda (Nawou)

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Abstract

The economic empowerment of women has been argued by many as a prerequisite for sustainable development, pro-poor growth and the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals. That is why a number of development practitioners are now adopting strategies aiming at empowering poor women by focusing on sectors that employ more women than men such as craft business in Uganda. Theories have revealed that promoting craft business will help poor women to transform their economic, social and political status in their respective families and communities. Inspired by the framework of Sarah Longwe on different levels of women empowerment, this study investigates the extent to which women organizations empower craftswomen economically using a case study of National Association of Women Organizations in Uganda (NAWOU). This research was done with data collected in July 2011 on different groups of craftswomen working with NAWOU and operating in Kampala and Mpigi districts. The researcher examined the nature and scope of women's craft activities in women organizations, the ability of craftswomen to utilize the opportunities provided by women organizations and the extent of economic empowerment of craftswomen. The results suggested that different services has been offered to craftswomen and these include training in product development and fair pricing, facilitating access to local and international market, training in marketing and business management, training in FAL, leadership and self-confidence, etc. All these services have strengthened the contribution of craftswomen to cash income in their respective family which have allowed them to acquire some productive resources and to improve their socio-political positions both at the household and community levels. However, the research has found out that gender role imbalances in some families hinder married women to perform well their career as some of their time which could be devoted to craft activities is spent in household chores.

Key Words: *Economic empowerment, women organizations, craftswomen, Sarah Longwe empowerment framework, Local Economic Development, National Association of Women organizations in Uganda*

1. Introduction

Worldwide, women were found to form the majority of the poor. The findings of the World Bank have shown that in 2005 women represented up to 70% of the rural poor, earned 10% of the world's income and owned 1% of the world's property (World Bank 2005 cited in energia, 2010). This lack of access to income and to other productive resources limits the ability of women to contribute to their household welfare and to the socio-economic

development of their countries. Therefore, the idea of economic empowerment emerged in the discussion of development practitioners in the mid-1980, as a strategy of increasing women's access to economic resources and opportunities that are fundamental to strengthening women's rights and enabling women to have control over their lives and exert influence in society (OECD, 2011).

This model of economic empowerment of women has to be operationalized through women organizations, movements that revolve around specific issues and causes, networks and coalition that bridge women's group (Sen and Grown, 1987 cited in Visvanathan et al.1997). Townsend et al, (1999), also recognize the role of Women Organizations in empowering grassroots women through a broad approach which takes account of the collective aspect of empowerment.

It has been argued by Nicholls and Opal(n.d) that one way of achieving the goal of women's economic empowerment is to focus on those products which are produced by women more than men, such as handicrafts in Algeria, as gender disaggregated data have revealed that in 2008 women dominated the handicrafts sector by 95 per cent. (Nicholls and Opal cited in Anna, 2010). Likewise in Uganda, the process of women empowerment can be successful by focussing on handicraft sector since this sector is dominated by women as expressed by the Uganda handicraft export strategy (2005) that handicrafts production in Uganda is engaged in by rural youth of both gender but largely by women folk, to supplement household incomes. This desire of producing crafts for market came in mind of Ugandan women in 1970s (Tadria, 1973). Thereafter, the idea of empowering women through crafts emerged in 1990s. From that time, a number of organizations were established to provide help to craftswomen and these include Export Promotion Board, Uganda Women Entrepreneurs Limited (UWEAL), Uganda Small Scale Industries Association (USSIA), National Organization of Women Associations in Uganda (NOWAU), National Arts and Crafts Association of Uganda (NACAU) and many others (Uganda Sector handicraft sector strategy, 2005). NAWOU has been created in 1992 and operates as a Fair Trade organization concerned with the status of the craftspeople and is therefore playing an important role in identifying their needs and challenges, conducting baseline studies, training in life skills and product development and finally getting the women to a level where they understand the basic requirements of productive business and being more market driven. (Kyagera, 2011).

However, there is still a gap on how women organizations empower women through the promotion of craft industry. Young has noted that some

of them empower poor women by promoting their entrepreneurial confidence as if the only problem is the lack of drive among poor women (Young 1997 cited in Townsend et al. 1999). Therefore, this study examines the ways in which women organizations serve to contribute to the economic empowerment of women by focusing on women's craft making business using a case study of the National Association of Women Organizations in Uganda.

2. The importance of economic empowerment of women for Local Economic Development

Eyben, R and others (2008) cited in OECD (2011) conceptualize economic empowerment as process of increasing women's access to economic resources and opportunities including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development and market information. However, as noted by Townsend et al.(1999), poor people also need a transformation of structures which hold them down. That is why Linda Mayoux in her research for ILO (n.d) has suggested that the economic empowerment of women should contribute to development through three different levels:

- **Economic empowerment:** Women's participation to enterprise activities gives them a greater economic role in decision-making. Exercising control over these financial matters enables women to optimise their own and the household's welfare. The investment in women's economic activities will improve their employment opportunities and thus have a 'trickle down and out' effect.
- **Increased well-being:** Access to enterprise activities and making decisions on how to use these facilities strengthen the women's say in economic decisions of the household. This enables them to increase expenditure on their children's and their own well-being.
- **Social and political empowerment:** A combination of women's increased economic activity and control over income resulting from access to enterprise activities will improve women's skills, mobility, and access to knowledge and support networks. Their status within the community is enhanced. These changes are reinforced by group formation, leading to wider movements of social and political change.

3. Why economic empowerment of women through craft matters in developing countries?

ILO (n.d) has proved that women tend to be at a disadvantage compared to men in getting involved in economic activities, especially those that require

long periods of time outside the home, because women tend to spend more time at home and have fewer contacts with others within the community, village or town than men. Therefore, Anna (2010) argues that empowering women through crafts matters, since craftwork tends to be compatible with their domestic roles because of the flexible hours and because of the fact that the work can be done within or near the home. In addition to that, she states that craft is an important sector in women's livelihood since it is the only viable option for employment and income generation for many poor women with low level[s] of skills and education. Participation in the craft sector has become a survival strategy for many poor women of Africa, Asia and Latin America (Anna, 2010 in Wills, 2006), that is why in various developing countries, a focus on the development of a craft industry has been part of all of their empowerment strategies as it relates to the improvement of women's opportunities to contribute cash to household incomes. This process not only results in additional information being available for the identification of economic opportunities, but also boosts women's self-confidence and enables them to better manage their enterprises (ibid.).

4. Methodology

In order to analyze the contribution of women organizations to the economic empowerment of craftswomen in Uganda, NAWOU was selected as a case study. NAWOU was chosen purposively since this organization is among the pioneers of women's empowerment in Uganda. Moreover, it is among the few organizations that are able to extend their services to the whole territory of Uganda. Primary data were collected in July 2011. But, due to financial and time constraints, data were collected only in two districts i.e Kampala and Mpigi districts. These two districts were selected for the purpose of getting information of both urban (Kampala district) and rural (Mpigi district) craftswomen. Three different methods were employed in data collection and these are: Questionnaires, semi-structured interview and focus group discussion.

A total number of 82 respondents were selected for answering the questionnaires using stratified random sampling technique, but data analysis was done only on 80 questionnaires since two questionnaires were not fully answered. The interview was done with four officers of NAWOU, its Secretary General, the assistant program officer, the assistant marketing officer and the seller of crafts product at the Uganda Museum shop. Focus group discussion technique was also employed during data collection using two different groups of women one from Kampala district and another from Mpigi district composed by 10 people per group. During focus group

discussion, the analysis of the levels of women's empowerment addressed by NAWOU was done using Women's Empowerment Framework Tools 1 and 2 of Sarah Longwe.

5. Results

5.1. Services offered for the promotion of craft business of women

For the promotion of craft business of women, the services offered by NAWOU are: training in product development and fair pricing, facilitating access to local and international market, training in marketing and business management, leadership and self-confidence, etc.

Training in product development is offered to every member and its objective is to increase the skills and expertise of women for improving the quality of their products to match with the ever changing tastes and preferences of their customers. Training in product quality is jointly offered with training in fair pricing which increase the bargaining power capacity of women and consequently allow them to combat the exploitation of brokers and get better prices for their products sold to NAWOU and in other markets as fair pricing promotes payment of the price that reflect the work done by producers.

Access to local and international market is another service offered by NAWOU to its members. At the local level, NAWOU has opened a shop at the Ugandan Museum where craft products are exhibited. At the international level, NAWOU has a number of customers; some of them give orders at regular basis while others give orders occasionally. Among the occasional customers there are OXFAM in Australia, Barbra Wilson in UK, Stanly in Australia and One Village in UK. The international regular customers include Ten Thousand Village in USA, Servv International in USA, Ten Thousand Village in Canada, Hanson in Germany and Trade Aid in Newzealand. It was noted that the process of access to international market is facilitated by the fact that NAWOU is member of Fair Trade Organizations. This network with Fair Trade Movement at the local level (UGAFAT), Regional level (COFTA) and international level (WFTO) provides to NAWOU an opportunity to market information and other facilities to access international markets.

5.2. Contribution of crafts business to the economic empowerment of women

This study established that craft business had contributed to the economic, social and political impact of women at the household and community levels.

Increased income is the first benefit got by craftswomen. The comparison between the income gained by women before and after doing craft business has shown that 97.5% of respondents had an income which was less or equal to 100.000 UGSHs per year before doing craft business, while after doing craft business the majority of them (56.25%) had an income greater than 1.000.000 UGSHs per year. The mean income of respondents has been increased from 46,875 UGSHs per year before doing craft business to 903,125 UGSHs per year after doing craft business per year.

Access to increased income helped craftswomen to acquire a wide range of high-valued property namely livestock, land, capital to start small businesses, school fees at secondary and university level for their children, mobile phones, access to saving and credit services, improved welfare (better nutrition, clothing and medical care) etc. Moreover, some women reported that they were able to contribute to the acquisition of modern houses for their families and to buy motorcycles and bicycles which have created employment opportunities for their husbands, children and/or neighbours. One woman from Mpigi District revealed that she has started poultry project from income of craft business which had increased her opportunity to receive other poultry from NAADS project.

The study has also established that craftswomen have gained decision making power in their families as explained by the figure below:

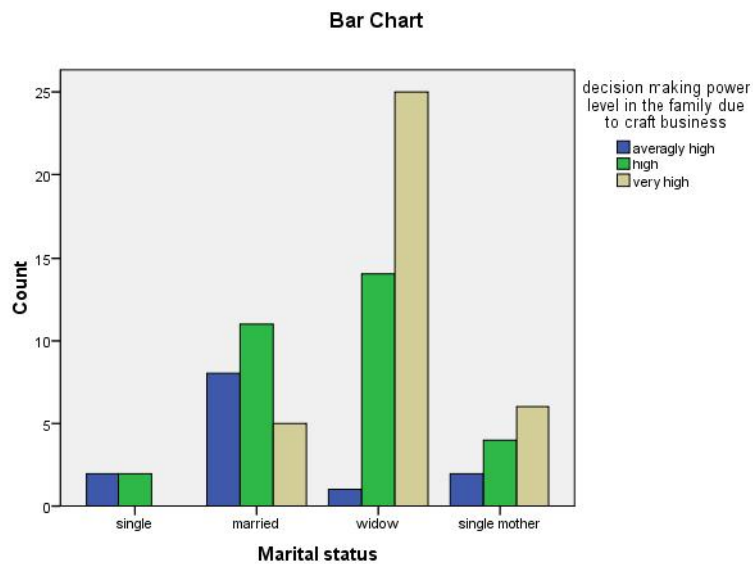


Figure 1: Decision making power of craftswomen at the family

The figure above shows that craftswomen have a certain level of decision making in their respective family concerning the use of family income. As reported by women during focus group discussions, before gaining income from craft business, men were used to make all decisions concerning food, clothing, child education, children’s marriages and any other concerning the use of family income which is not the case today. Their views on how, when, where to allocate family income are taken into account, they are no longer relying on their husbands or other family members for everything, they had become economically independent.

However, the figure above also shows that the levels of decision making reported by different categories of women on the basis of their marital status were different. This had inspired the researcher to do a chi-square test for verifying whether decision making level of women was influenced by their marital status.

Table 1: Decision making level in the family versus marital status Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	20.150	6	.003
N of Valid Cases	80		

Field report, July, 2011

H_0 : no relationship between “marital status” and “decision making level”
 From the above table, reject the null hypothesis and use the H_1 which states that there is a statistically significant relationship between decision making level and marital status based on sig (0.003) which is below 0.05.

5.3. Levels of Women’s Empowerment addressed by NAWOU

The results of this study have shown that NAWOU address all the five levels of women empowerment as shown in table 2 below:

Table 2: Level of Women’s Empowerment addressed by NAWOU

Levels of equality	Level of recognition		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Control			✓
Participation			✓
Conscientisation			✓
Access			✓
Welfare			✓

Source: Adapted from Women’s Empowerment Framework Tools 1 and 2 of Sarah Longwe

- **Welfare level:** was addressed indirectly through increased income of women as NAWOU has no activities directed at increasing women's access to food, shelter, medication, etc.
- **Access level:** observed in the process of facilitating access to productive resources such as access to local and international markets, training in product development and pricing which helped women to produce qualified products and get better prices, and training in marketing and business management. The income got from craft business also helped women to acquire a number of productive resources namely land, livestock, houses, improved education of children, small businesses, motorcycles, bicycles, savings and credits services, etc. **Conscientisation:** observed in the programme of NAWOU of raising awareness about gender issues as their goal is to "see a strong unified women's body equipped with the knowledge and skills aimed at making women self-reliant." Craftswomen reported that some of their colleagues are occupying leadership position in their communities thanks to self-confidence and awareness creation through NAWOU sensitization. For example, in Mpigi District, one woman from craft producers occupies vice/chairperson at the local council. Craft business has also increased self-esteem of women within their respective communities due to their capacity to become economically independent. However, women reported that they get less support from their husband in household chores which reduce their time devoted to craft activities.
- **Participation:** this level is addressed during price determination which is done on the basis of fair pricing.
- **Control:** at the household level, women gained power to decide on the use of their income. Training in business management, marketing and record keeping helped women not to rely on other peoples for running their businesses.

5.4. Challenges to the sustainability of craft business of women

Though the study established that craft business was crucial in promoting the social, economic and political wellbeing of women and their families, some challenges have been identified both at the side of women producers and organization.

For craftswomen: there is a problem of climate changes especially when there is too much rain, some of the raw material such as raffia cannot be dried up for being used. Poor health conditions is another problem for some HIV/AIDs infected women, whose working capacity reduces when they are

taking medicine. Some married women do not receive enough support in the household activities which reduces their time to concentrate on craft business.

For the organizations: There is a problem of the falling dollar rate against the Ugandan Shilling which reduces the profit of the organization as the invoices are established in the Ugandan currency. Language barrier is another problem observed during training in product development since Uganda use many local languages. Sometimes, the organization delivers incomplete orders due to the factors that affect the working conditions of women. This can create problems between the organization and its customers which can lead to loss of market in the long run.

5.5. Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, the services rendered by women organizations have helped craftswomen to transform their economic, social and political status in their respective families and communities.

At the household level, access to increased income has enhanced women's participation in the allocation of family income, women were able to have access to a wide range of property which was not the case due to patriarchal power systems. At the community level, craftswomen buy raw materials to their neighbours and offer jobs to them, they provide financial contributions for different functions within the community, they assume leadership positions and so forth. Thus, the findings of this research have proved that NAWOU plays a positive role towards the economic empowerment of craftswomen.

For the sustainability of such impact, these recommendations are suggested: NAWOU should see how to stock some raw materials which are not produced locally. The researcher also noted that the continuous loss of the value of Ugandan Shilling currency against a dollar reduces the organization profit. It is recommended to the policy makers of the Ugandan Government to adopt measures aiming at stabilizing the value of Ugandan Shillings against foreign currencies. It is also recommended to NAWOU to negotiate with its customers and see how to make compensation of the loss caused by the devaluation of the Ugandan Shilling. Sensitization about the importance of craft business in promoting socio-economic status of women is needed for increasing the number of women involved in that business which does not require much capital and skills and promotes the participation of poor women in local economic development. It has been also found in this study that women get less help from their husbands in the household chores even when they are busy working to meet the deadline

for delivering orders. Therefore, more training and sensitization about gender are needed to be offered to both men and women. This will help to reduce some gender based violence arising from the resistance of men against the empowerment of women.

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