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Development through Entrepreneurship: microcredit, learning and the persistence of poverty amongst women in urban Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Microcredit strategies combine the logic of business, progressive approaches to learning from experience and an over-riding ambition to reduce poverty, especially amongst women. The focus in such interventions on the independent, entrepreneurial citizen promises not only new ways to generate economic growth and sustainable development, but a fundamental recalibration of the repressive social relations thought to be at the root of women's persistent 'under-development'. The paper explores women's experiences from their roles as entrepreneurs, and reflects on how the learning processes and outcomes associated with microcredit schemes 'shape the self', often in quite unpredictable ways. The paper reports an ethnographic study of disadvantaged women in Dar es Salaam and follows them as they participate in NGO-based training schemes, 'practice' entrepreneurship in a range of income-generating settings, and negotiate the consequences of the new subjectivities on which the independent, entrepreneurial citizen is based. Like many microcredit programmes, the majority of women in the study were full time housewives before joining the scheme. Others had left their jobs on the grounds of retrenchment, prejudice or gender discrimination. In all cases, they started their own businesses with little or no business experience or education. Whilst some appear to have embraced the new opportunities, others have struggled. In all cases, microcredit and the learning processes it unleashes, produces contradictory and ambivalent feelings of success and failure, hope and disappointment, progress and exclusion. The paper explores these ambivalences in order to critique development initiatives that are based on universal notions of autonomy and self-determination in contexts shaped by dependence and structural inequality.

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To date the main thrust of research in the field of microcredit has been in relation either to its effect on poverty alleviation and gender equality amongst women or financial control within lending institutions. Whilst much literature has explored the material development of women involved in such schemes (e.g. Mayoux 2002), little exists to help us understand the broader human development implications of this kind of intervention. Clearly, quantitative indicators tell us much about loan servicing and repayment rates, business growth, income generation and, in a monetary sense, steps towards poverty reduction. In the process, though, women gain significant learning and educational experiences through their involvement in microcredit schemes which, in turn, have implications for their self-representation and identity. It is argued here that women taking part in businesses funded and supported by Western donor agencies are much more than women, wives and mothers 'lifted' out of poverty. Women are remade subjectively; incorporating, contesting and rejecting the values of private enterprise, liberal democracy and gender equality on which such 'development' is based. This aspect of microcredit is grossly under-researched and theorised in the development literature and simply 'beyond the radar' of most development agencies.

The subjective impact of entrepreneurship takes different forms. Firstly, women are introduced to a knowledge base that prioritizes the logic of competitive commerce and liberal political ideology. Secondly, in the course of the challenges they face in business, women enter new relations and social worlds with customers, creditors and development agencies, and renegotiate deeply structured relations within marriages, families and the community. Thirdly, and as a consequence of these two points, women become what Levinson and others (1996) call 'educated persons'; by participating in the production of knowledge within the field of entrepreneurship which, itself is grounded within the wider social, cultural and political context of Tanzania, women produce new selves as resources with which to make sense of Dar es Salaam's fluid modernity and its relation to the World. The implications for women of these roles as (re)educated persons is far from straightforward and demands that development interventions of this type turn their gaze inward to the ambivalences, dilemmas and paradoxes of (politically) liberal development.

To uncover this subjective impact, we use learning theories from social anthropology and the literature on working life to expose the ways in which entrepreneurial identities are sculptured. We argue that the subject (in this case the entrepreneur) is a blend of multiple learning processes and ongoing struggles to meet business task requirements that are themselves integrated with one's own general life experiences. This process involves embracing the euphoria of development rhetoric with its promise of salvation and emancipation, squaring this with traditional family and social dynamics and accommodating the oppressive debt-servicing and repayment technologies built into microcredit. Such negotiations guarantee no predetermined outcome (Salling Olesen, 2001a, 2001b) and it is through a focus on education as cultural production that we might begin to see a fuller range of effects arising from development's latest 'silver bullet'.

1. Microcredit as development intervention

Empowering women through credit-based micro enterprise emerged in the 1990s following the implementation of structural adjustment policies (SAP) in the South (Fernando 1997, Scully, 1997). The implementation of SAPs intensified social and economic hardship for many, creating fewer employment opportunities, larger income disparities and the further marginalization of the poor (Isserles, 2003). By the mid-1990s, more than one billion people were living in poverty, the great majority of whom were women, and mostly in the developing countries (United Nations Human Development Report, 1997). The failure of macro-economic policy in the South led development agencies to seek new approaches to alleviate poverty amongst the most affected groups, but to do so in ways that would maintain the general current of liberal economic reform (Fernando 1997).

Microcredit was promoted as an innovative way to target women whose work was identified to be largely invisible and unpaid and thus missing from conventional development programmes (Ghodsee, 2003). The women in development (WID) movement and its heir, gender in development (GAD), aimed to incorporate gender into projects targeting economic growth, and criticized development and advocacy initiatives that were ‘gender-blind’¹. The evolution of the notion of empowerment has been traced to these initiatives (Vavrus & Richey 2003). Currently, gender has been mainstreamed into development projects within most multilateral and bilateral aid agencies, and microcredit has become central to these efforts (Winship, 2004; United Nations, 2008).

This shift in development thinking has not taken place without critique. Whilst the proponents of microcredit credit maintain that involvement in such schemes improves poor women’s socio-economic conditions, thereby altering the relations between gender and class, some question its potential for changing social relations. Here, research has raised doubts about the extent to which women have been able to adopt new subject positions within rigid and hierarchical social structures (Isserles, 2003). The relationship between microcredit and the various discourses of ‘empowerment’ has been a particular source of scholarly critique, with one powerful analysis suggesting that rather than leading to greater freedoms for women, microcredit appropriates the ‘language of empowerment’ and ‘...disciplines poor women to manage their own welfare through active participation in the liberal economy’ (Fernando, 2006, p. 7). Some have argued that oppressive repayment regimes, peer-group pressure and the moderate ambitions of most microcredit schemes have ensured women’s continued subjection to prevailing, local, power structures (Gómez & Humphreys Bebbington, 2006). Others have argued that microcredit must be understood in relation to the dynamics of the global political economy and the ‘drive’ for liberalisation within the financial sector (Weber, 2006). Rankin has taken this argument further, arguing that the deployment of social *capital* arguments in microcredit has enabled the logic of capitalism to infiltrate a field that emerged primarily for reasons of social justice and equity (Rankin 2006). One particularly powerful analysis – grounded in Foucault’s notion of governmentality – argues that microcredit systems have become embedded in the broader and pervasive ‘discourse’ of development where a certain configuration of relations of knowledge, power and subjectivity work to link ‘...First World capital markets with the production and encouragement of the Third World entrepreneur in a neo-liberal policy environment...’ (Brigg, 2006, p.80). In contrast to the normative, if not sentimental, language in which most discussion of microcredit is packaged, he argues:

At the local level, microcredit programmes have the effect of promoting entrepreneurial subjective modalities over other ways of being and depoliticising poverty through an individualistic rather than redistributive approach to its alleviation. They do so by inscribing neoliberal developmentalism through innovative disciplinary techniques. The linking of these micro-programmes – operating at the level of individual selves – with world capital markets is an individualising-totalising operation par excellence. Just as the peasant was a privileged object of intervention in the expansion of nineteenth century European governmentalisation, the world’s poor are currently targeted through popular and apparently apolitical microcredit programmes to act upon their selves in concert with wider developmental goals in a neoliberal and developmentalist governmentalisation of the Third World.

(Brigg, 2006, p. 81)

¹ The Women in Development (WID) movement attempted to highlight the importance of women’s roles and status but was criticized for involving them mainly as participants and beneficiaries of development initiatives. By contrast, the Gender and Development (GAD) movement seeks to analyse the causes of gender inequality within the context of relations between women and men and to challenge gender disparities within the divisions of labour, institutions and wider social systems (Young, 2002).

Clearly, microcredit generates heated voices on behalf of the poor. The phenomenal success of its many variants in reaching millions of women and affecting genuine material improvements in the lives of individuals, families and communities is undisputed, even by the most sceptical of critical Marxist and post-structuralist scholars. Nevertheless, the power of developmentalist thinking – be it structured as a ‘discourse’ or simply a manifestation of the vested interests of the capital class – has effectively shielded microcredit from the gaze of critical researchers. When such research has been presented, it is usually from the policy or macro perspective, often making expansive claims about its ‘impact’ on women’s lives. When research has adopted an ethnographic stance, issues of everyday life rather than subjectivity have been in focus. The study reported here attempts to address these shortcomings. We examine the policy landscape of microcredit in Tanzania, two NGOs created to support women’s empowerment, and a number of women who have experienced and reflected upon its consequences. Unlike other studies, we use theories of learning to explore the subjectivities credited by such development interventions and we use this approach in order to expose many of the triumphs, disappointments and ambivalences expressed by the poor but mainly alluded to in the literature. In this way we hope to contribute to an informed debate on the role and possibilities for microcredit as a tool for social justice.

2. Exploring development through learning

Microcredit programs also include other services like education and legal advice. It has been argued that combining credit with social development activities, referred to as “micro-credit plus,” can significantly advance women’s rights. For example, the support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) for women’s economic empowerment is coupled with skills-building and other training to empower women in all aspects of their lives. Through these programmes, NGOs attempt to provide poor women with small loans, train them in income-generation skills, and deliver health information and life skills to help them better care for their children and families. One example is Lazar’s ‘human development model’ which refers to microcredit schemes that combine credit and institutionalized training sessions, family planning, nutrition, infant health, women’s health and rights, basic business management and technical skills development, HIV/AIDS and gender awareness. Such approaches aim to connect business competences with a host of related life processes which, it is argued, ultimately affect the prospects for business success (Lazar, 2004, p. 302). The deeper political rationale of such comprehensive training seems clear, although it is uncertain if the reliance on formal and institutionalised approaches to learning is sufficient to connect to the histories, experiences and motivations of participants.

By contrast, research in the field of professional development underlines the relationship between learning process, professional identity and subjectivity (Salling Olsen, 2007; Fenwick, 2002). Here, there is consensus that workplace learning is ‘experiential and informal, embedded in a particular context and community of practice, and deeply connected with identity’ (Fenwick, 2002, p. 162). This definition of learning extends beyond institutionalized training to include experiential and informal learning, building on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) suggestion that learning is social and comes largely from our experience of participating in daily life. As a result, social learning theories now view learning as a construction and participation in social processes, and emphasise processes of knowing, of being and of becoming (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Elkjaer, 2003; Salling Olsen, 2007).

In learning processes there is therefore a concern with issues of identity, with learning to speak, act and improvise in ways that make sense in a given community. This conceptualisation contrasts with the traditional idea that learning is only connected to processes of internalization. By contrast, learning is about ‘increasing participation in communities of practice’ and concerns the ‘whole

person acting in the world' (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 49). Learning is thus related to self representation, and is not simply 'learning by doing' or 'learning from experience'. From this perspective, we can think of learning as the generation of meaning (Tennant, 1997, p. 73). Learners construct their own understanding; they do more than reflect on what they have experienced and, rather, attempt to provide meaning, regularity and order to the events of the world, even in the absence of full or complete information (Von Glasersfeld, 1989). Such learning entails participation in a community of practice where participation 'refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities' (Wenger 1999, p. 4). Here, the notion of subjectivity is central and can be understood as a dynamic interplay between cognitive and social phenomena that leads to processes of identity formation.

Subjectivity as a concept therefore suggests that identities are fluid and partial; in effect always subject to discourses, changed power relations between rival discourses, or by different subject positions becoming available or necessary within discourses (Weedon 1987). However, the dynamic of subjectivity involves negotiation, defining one's position, creating meaning from various interactions and, not least, deciding particular images to adopt or reject. This movement is not solely rational or self-governing. Individuals as negotiators are produced by cultural discourse and are forced to select from discourse symbols in ways that other people may not acknowledge. Subjects are yearning for certain images which enable them to become *particular* subjects and to understand their subjectivity in *particular* ways (Fenwick, 2002p. 162).

The space of microcredit, with its multifaceted entanglements of money, businesses, identity, and power is a complex site for such negotiations and thus learning. Work-related learning is entangled with workers' (in this case entrepreneurs) ongoing and much broader struggles to produce coherent and meaningful subjectivities (Forrester, 1999). This is particularly so when the female entrepreneurial subject attempts to resist or reshape the demands and requirements of microcredit NGOs, and to balance these with their own imaginations, commitments, aspirations, emotional engagements and formations of self that are ongoing as part of business practice. In this process, workers' subjectivities are being shaped by cooperative structures and practices to become 'active learners and self regulating subjects' (Garrick and Usher 1999, p. 66).

With this in mind, we also include the regular meetings of women entrepreneurs with their NGO supporters and managers. In addition to ensuring compliance with NGO rules and regulations, and securing loan repayments, these meetings aim to instil the value of competition and achievement in participants while at the same time disciplining and nurturing the entrepreneurship that will ensure that women maintain good credit ratings and participate fully in their chosen markets (Lairap-Fonderson, 2002). Indeed, entrepreneurship training attempts to instill initiative in its subjects as well as a disposition towards leadership and management. They encourage risk, the acceptance of failure, and provide practical strategies for women so that they can reorganise social and economic mechanisms in order to turn resources and situations to practical advantage. Such training attempts to nurture capacities to operate in networks that help women to develop new ideas and expand and advance (new) business opportunities. Such encounters are perhaps unique within the field of development for their ambition to work on and *through* subjects, and should most certainly be taken seriously as a form of experiential and informal learning.

3. Studying entrepreneurship: study site, methods and participants

This study was conducted in Tanzania between April 2005 and July 2006. Dar es Salaam was chosen as the field site for the empirical work, not least because successive decades of radical economic reform have brought to the surface a range of tensions and dilemmas about how best to 'develop' Tanzanian society in ways that resonate with global pressures and tendencies *and* take account of and preserve local cultural values and norms. In many respects, the urban space of Dar es Salaam has reinvented itself into a thoroughly modern African city. In policy terms, the last vestiges of socialist nationalism have given way to a thorough embracing of the liberalized market economy. Women residing in this region of the Country have high access to microfinance facilities. As Tanzania's largest city and commercial centre, the informal sector is well developed, making it possible to identify a host of relevant microcredit centres where women are active. More importantly, the capital became an ideal context to study the meeting place of developmental modernity and tradition. Many women residing in Dar es Salaam have migrated from rural areas and face significant challenges in their attempts to balance the possibilities provided by modern development against the expectations, constraints and traditional roles they embody as women, mothers and wives.

The empirical study is qualitative by design and based on three data sets. First, data was collected from key actors in the formulation of policies about microcredit schemes. These included extended interviews with selected officials from the Government of Tanzania, donors, and officials from international financial institutions. Policy documents charting Tanzania's donor-driven route to modernity were analysed, as were specific policies related to women and microcredit. This part of the study resulted in a conceptualization of the contemporary women as an independent, entrepreneurial citizen; a notable departure from the socialist subject created in the early years after Tanzania's independence.

A second data set centered upon the key implementers of development policies within this field. Here, staff from two NGOs were selected for intensive treatment that involved interviews at different times during the study and extended observations of meetings, training programmes and other organised activities aimed at developing entrepreneurial dispositions. Various policy documents and reports were also gathered. Tanzania's microfinance industry incorporates a wide range of microfinance institutions, from development NGOs based closely on the Grameen Bank Model, to commercial institutions that are more akin to banks themselves. The study chose to focus on two institutions at the less commercial end of the sector: Maarufu and Mikopo². The two NGOs have a very different approach to loan delivery.

Maarufu is formally incorporated in Washington DC as a non-profit corporation and uses a group solidarity model based on peer pressure, and a three-tier loan guarantee system to ensure loan repayment. Compulsory weekly savings are collected as part of the loan insurance scheme, and these are refundable upon exit. Maarufu uses a 'modified Grameen' methodology where clients are required to form groups of five individuals (Enterprise Groups, or EGs) and agree to guarantee each other's loans. Ultimately, ten EGs come together to form a larger center, or Market Enterprise Committee (MEC) which acts as another level of guarantee on the loans. The first loans of approximately 100,000 Tanzania Shillings (TShs.)³ are made to two members of each EG. Four weeks later, two more members receive their loans. Repayments including principal and interest are made on a weekly basis. The initial loan must be repaid in 25 weeks, with the second being cleared

²Maarufu and Mikopo are pseudonyms.

³ 1 USD = approx. 1,300 Tanzania Shillings in August 2009.

within 50 weeks. Each subsequent loan has a 100 week maturity.

Mikopo, by contrast, was founded by a widow who inherited a single cow on the death of her husband. Currently Mikopo is financed by bilateral funding which is organised through a local rural bank. Unlike the other NGO in our study, Mikopo provides its loans on an individual (rather than group) basis. The average lease value for Mikopo is 500,000 TShs. The effective lease term is 6 or 12 or 18 months, depending on the amount of the lease and the preference of the lessee. All leases of up to 500,000 TShs. have to be repaid within 6 or 12 months. Credits take the form of leases of business equipment and small working capital loans. Clients must agree to a number of specific conditions prior to receiving loan support. The most important of these is that applicants must provide two guarantors *including* the husband.

The third data set revolved around a group of women who had joined microcredit schemes conducted by these NGOs. This was the core of the research. Here, observations of everyday life, business practice and family dynamics served as a foundation of material which was supplemented by extended multiple interviews. Participants in the study were selected in part on the basis of recommendations from the NGOs and in part from the referrals of involved women themselves. The study criteria focused on women who had joined schemes and were still running their businesses after twelve months of operation. It also sought to involve women with a diversity of experiences, different types and sizes of business and groundings in different kinds of communities. These selection criteria led to a sample of participants reflecting diverse kinds and sizes of businesses from large-scale capital-intensive operations to very small vegetable sellers. The sample included women living and running their businesses in middle class neighbourhoods, to women living and working in scattered and deprived areas of Dar es Salaam.

Eight women were selected for detailed treatment, four from each of the two NGOs. They are identified here as: Jenita, Habiba, Mama Muro, Sikitu, Mgeni, Debora, Mama Mrangi, Mbagala woman⁴. Six of the women were full time housewives before joining the schemes. Two (a secretary and a clerk) had left their jobs because of retrenchment, prejudice or gender discrimination. Jenita, Habiba and Debora managed large businesses whilst Mama Muro, Sikitu, Mbagala woman and Mgeni operated with modest capital. Mama Mrangi's vegetable business was by far the smallest. Habiba and Debora, working with TV and clothes shops respectively, can be understood as having challenged social convention by entering what is traditionally thought of as a male domain of business. Jenita is perhaps the most adventurous for investing in a water supply business⁵ and a high-return quality clothes business using imported raw materials. For the majority, though, the businesses financed by micro credit reflect a traditional gendered division of labour. Mama Muro for example runs a poultry farm. Mama Mrangi sells vegetables in the streets of Dar es Salaam. Sikitu owns a tailoring market and Mgeni sells soft drinks. Mbagala woman owns a charcoal and pancake businesses⁶.

⁴ Women are presented here with pseudo names

⁵ For much of Dar es Salaam's history, water supply services have been a government responsibility and one where the State was not able to satisfy demand. Jenita's business is therefore contributing significantly to addressing a local water shortage in her neighbourhood.

⁶ This refers to a particular type of Tanzanian pancake, commonly known as 'maandazi'.

Table 1 below summarizes the domain of businesses run by women in the study.

Case	Capital (USD)	Category	Business type	Business Domain
Jenita	10,000	Big	Water and clothing (international)	New Innovation
Habiba	10,000	Big	TV shop	Male
Debora	6000	Big	Female clothing shop	Male
Mama Muro	2,000	Medium	Poultry	Female
Mgeni	1600	Medium	Soft drinks	Female
Sikitu	800	Medium	Tailoring	Female
Mbagala woman	700	Medium	Charcoal and pancake (maandazi)	Female
Mama Mrangi	100	Small	Vegetable selling	Female

Table 1: Economic Activities of Women in the Study

These eight participants were observed and interviewed at different times during the field study. Observations were carried out during ‘training’ and supplementary visits to the NGOs offices, at their businesses sites and in their homes. It was hoped that data collected would shed light on their businesses as well as their learning and development processes. Participants were interviewed multiple times, using information from previous interviews both for clarification and elaboration. Interviews took the form of in-depth reflective conversations where participants were asked to discuss their life experiences that had brought them to their present situations, and to describe the meanings they had given to these experiences. In the interviews, women were encouraged to talk about their choices and the changes they experienced during the journey from housewife and mother to business women; the knowledge and skills they had gained and valued most in their business; and the challenges and tactics they have used to meet these challenges. In narrating how they became entrepreneurs, many women also discussed their needs in business, their definitions of success, and their personal processes of reflection and identity formation. Most women could not talk about themselves without associating themselves with significant others, their extended families or the society at large. In the process, women also talked about the ways in which they undertook their day to day business responsibilities while at same time maintaining their home and parental duties.

4. Microcredit as panacea: the perspective of development agencies

Tanzania’s economic performance has improved in recent years, even though the Country remains one of the poorest nations in the world (World Bank, 2009). In the year 2008, GDP increased by 7.4% to about \$464 per capita and yet the National Level Household Budget Survey estimates that 43% of Tanzanians live below the basic needs poverty line (National Bureau of Statistics, 2009). The economy is still dominated by agriculture, the share of which is 45% of total production and 80% of employment. This context of persistent poverty has led to a focus on microcredit in the Country’s National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty (abbreviated as MKUKUTA in Swahili). In 2000, the Government underscored the role of microcredit in its *National Microfinance Policy (NMP)*. The policy covers the provision of financial services to low income segments of the society with the specific aims of contributing to economic growth and the reduction of poverty. Currently, a number of donor agencies operating in Tanzania are utilizing microcredit interventions as key aspects of their gender policies.

The most common method used to measure women's business success is financial worth, size and rate of growth: the more the entrepreneur and business are worth the more successful the entrepreneur is considered to be. These measures of worth are given great weight not only by society in general but also by staff from the NGOs involved in the study, even though both of these were not-for-profit institutions. For the director of Mikopo, the aim of micro credit was 'to see the woman's business grow'. She added:

...we would like to see women operating big business and even graduate to big loans and create employment opportunities for other women...We don't like to see women continue making pancakes. We would like to see women empowered to engage in big responsibilities at home and in the society.

(Director, Mikopo, 29/05/2005)

In official documentation, NGOs described women's success in terms of their ability to settle the (weekly) repayment. Here, the criteria of repayment coupled with an evaluation of business worth went together when assessing women's success. For the second of the two NGOs involved in the study (Maarufu), women such as Jenita and Debora were named as successful recipients, with Jenita a clear role model. In addition to always paying her weekly dues on time, Jenita's business was categorized as 'big', with daily sales above 30,000 TShs. and a long history (six years) of successful involvement.

For government officials, however, a key outcome was accessibility and expansion of microcredit to new entrants. For one government administrator, the reference point was the 1980s and a time when credit facilities were not widely available to women. A senior official in the Ministry of Community Development, Gender and Children cited several reasons for previous exclusionary practices, arguing that for many years women had been defined by their role as 'queen of the house', 'child bearer and rearer' and 'titular decision maker'. Women were also 'objects of sexual pressure' and expected to care for orphans, the sick, old aged and victims of HIV and AIDS. For those engaged in the formal economy, employment opportunities were restricted to secretarial tasks (especially typing), and cleaning. Following women's access to microcredits and the establishment of their own businesses, women were now seen by this official as 'wealth and resource owners, strategic decision makers, breadwinners, powerful individuals, planners, directors and managers of their own lives and businesses, and controllers of their own bodies' (Senior Official, MCDGC 14/12/2005). Such qualities, traditionally ascribed to men, signalled in clear terms the policy ambition attached to microcredit. For donors, the aim was similarly emancipatory:

...microcredit schemes targeting women have managed to break free of the structural paradox of most humanitarian efforts...It is a new chapter in human history which has allowed millions of women to free themselves and their families from the vicious cycle of poverty.

(Bilateral donor advisor, Dar es Salaam, 10/07/2007)

One multilateral donor actor made reference to a survey conducted for the Poverty Alleviation and Microfinance Project in Tanzania, suggesting that there had been positive changes in the economic and social status of the borrowers in the survey (Ellis, A. et al forthcoming)⁷. Incomes had increased, many borrowers had accumulated new assets and some had purchased new land either for their own homesteads or for agriculture. Food intake, clothing and housing conditions (including sanitation) had improved, and the education of borrowers' children had been positively affected. He ascribed these changes to women's participation in the microcredit schemes. NGOs built on this

⁷ World Bank (2007) Gender and Economic Growth in Tanzania: Creating Opportunities for women.

assessment by presenting images of women who have been 'empowered', economically and socially, after they had accessed microcredits. One Maarufu credit officer commented:

After taking part in a formal job with very little pay and unchallenging duties, and later being fired by her employer, Jenita is now a successful businesswoman. It was this experience which made Jenita consider taking part in the schemes because she was jobless. The loan from Maarufu has changed her life completely. She started with selling cloths and later she took part in a very innovative water business. Currently Jenita is one of the successful customers at the Magomeni branch and Maarufu Tanzania in general. She owns a house and a car. She is offering advice and help to her fellow women who are already taking part in Maarufu schemes to settle their weekly dues timely as well as to improve their businesses. She is respected by us, her husband and women here in Maarufu and in her community in general.

(Maarufu official, Dar es Salaam, 04/07/2005)

Such accounts suggest that microcredit is an important anti-poverty instrument which has the potential to address many structural problems. From this perspective, it creates opportunities for employment with high income returns and transforms gender relations. In all cases, those interviewed made it clear that microcredit had the potential to improve the quality of women's lives.

Mama Mrangi, Mbagala woman and later Debora were identified as 'failures' by the credit officers. The criteria used by development agents to identify shortcomings were much more diverse than the criteria used to identify successes. NGOs emphasized two measures: the inability to settle weekly dues and ultimately an entire loan, and the size of the business. Mbagala woman and Debora could not raise their weekly payments which forced them to approach another loaning institution in order to settle their debts with Maarufu. However, this step did not prevent loan group members from reprocessing personal and family items from Debora's home, thus exposing to her husband the nature of her involvement in a scheme that he had instructed her to avoid. Once described as one of the success stories of Maarufu, Debora's inability to settle her weekly dues led to a very different classification as 'failure' and threatened not only her marriage but hard-won social standing in the community.

Mama Mrangi on the other hand was described as a failure because of the inadequate and static size of her business. At the time of the field study, Mama Mrangi had received a loan of 100,000 TShs. from Maarufu in order to sell vegetables in one of the major streets of Mwenge Area in Dar es Salaam. She had been conducting her business in the area for eight years, with daily sales of around 4000 TShs., providing a profit of some 1000 TShs. per day if sales were good. Officers described Mbagala woman and Debora as 'negligent' and incapable of the 'hard work' required to repay their loans and grow their businesses. In contrast to Jenita and Habiba, Mama Mrangi was seen as 'lazy and culturally deficient'. Credit officers said Debora and Mbagala woman have displayed 'unacceptable expenditure behaviour', not least because they appeared to have misused their capital investment on unnecessary consumer items. Mama Mrangi was simply seen as beyond the reach of organized development initiatives and was tolerated by the NGO as long as her repayments were received on time.

Officials from bilateral and multilateral donor agencies understood failures like Mbagala woman, Debora and Mama Mrangi's quite differently. One advisor from a bilateral agency explained that women borrowers often sought loans for consumption purposes (for example to supplement school fees, food and health costs) which led to a momentary increase in living standards, but which would need to be paid for by harsh experiences or loss in the future as the experiences of Mbagala woman and Debora exemplify. However, one multilateral donor representative suggested that such failures

also reflected poorly on the lack of control within microcredit programmes themselves. It was noted that many microcredit NGOs were not regulated by the Bank of Tanzania, making it impossible for ‘the system’ to monitor effectively the performance of such providers and thus to protect naive or inexperienced clients. One senior donor advisor was also concerned about management problems in such schemes where many leaders were simply unqualified to direct enterprise-oriented development initiatives. Thus, while NGOs tended to place blame on individual woman, major donors also took account of factors and conditions that were external to the individual. Here, the landscape for successful entrepreneurship depended on better program governance, systems of monitoring and evaluation, proper business training for clients and improved access to markets for commodities.

Sikitu, Mgeni and Mama Muro, however, were not easily classified within these analyses and reflections. They were neither successful nor failures. All of the credit officers included in the study used a Swahili word ‘vuguvugu’ (lukewarm) to indicate their level of achievement. Sikitu, for example, runs a tailoring workshop with four machines. Her business, located within her family compound in the city, is of average size, with a cash capital of 800,000 TShs. Far from being marginal, this business generated daily sales of some 10,000 TShs. and a profit of approximately 100,000 TShs. per month. She had been conducting this business for seven years. Mgeni had been leasing a refrigerator worth some 600,000 TShs. from Mikopo. With this capital she was able to operate a soft drink business located, like Sikitu’s enterprise, within her rented family house. Her business was of ‘medium scale’ according to staff at Mikopo. Daily sales averaged 12,000 TShs. with a profit of some 2400 TShs., enough for Mgeni herself to balance involvement in microcredit-funded activities with a family suspicious of her new life. Mama Muro runs a poultry farm in Dar es Salaam, once again, located within her family house. By the time this study was conducted she had already invested more than 2,000,000 TShs. Her sales after every ten week period were some 500,000 TShs. which generated a profit of approximately 120,000 TShs. After some thirteen years of involvement and despite these modest but not inconsequential economic gains her business was categorized as ‘vuguvugu’. From the interviews, it appeared that development practitioners’ interest in women’s businesses focused mainly on activities that could grow quickly and guarantee healthy profits. Sikitu, Mgeni and Mama Muro, though, felt that they were gaining in different ways from their involvement in credit schemes. Whilst their businesses were static in some senses, they talked at great length about the challenges, possibilities and ambivalences that business life presented.

5. Micro-credit as complexity: women’s experiences of capitalist development

Women in the study described the impact of their entrepreneurial experiences quite differently from development agency actors. These ‘successes’ incorporated a range of material and social improvements, contradictions and feelings of ambivalence. Mixtures of success and failure, hope and disappointment, progress and exclusion typified the majority of responses. There were pressures from the market, customers, NGOs, solidarity group members (or guarantors), families, extended families, (local) government and society, coupled with their own expectations and anxieties. A synthesis of women’s entrepreneurial experiences suggested three major issues. Firstly, microcredit schemes embody politics from the local level of the household to the broader landscape of North – South dynamics, linking microcredit initiatives to the challenges and pitfalls of global capitalism. Additionally, microcredit embodies new *and* continued gendered identities that rest uncomfortably with traditional social roles and cultural practices. Finally, microcredit can be a tool which women can use in limited ways to resist and reorder deep-seated inequalities, but these possibilities must be nuanced by close analysis of actual inter-personal dynamics in particular family situations.

5.1 *Development and (as) capitalism*

Women's experiences suggested that microcredit has aligned itself not only to the capitalist mode of production but to the subjectivities made consequent by waged employment in low-skilled/ valued-added sectors of the economy. Its regulatory power attempts – sometimes explicitly - to transform women into efficient market actors. Despite the fact that government officials, donors and NGO officers emphasized the 'empowerment' potential of microcredit, the analysis of policy documents and rhetoric suggests that economic growth and poverty alleviation are the main objectives for microcredit schemes in Tanzania. Official data tell us much about the number of women who have accessed microcredit facilities, loan servicing and repayment rates, business growth, income generation and, in a monetary sense, steps towards poverty reduction (United Republic of Tanzania, 2005). Rather than a forward-looking vision of the politically-empowered female, the introduction of microcredit in Tanzania must be seen as a consequence of the Country's declining economic situation, not least due to the architecture of SAPs. Microcredit should therefore be seen as a tool to facilitate women's entrance into the market economy in order to fight economic decline rather than a tool to facilitate deep political and social change.

For the women who decided to take an active role in the business sector (like Jenita, Mama Muro, Mama Mrangi, Sikitu, Debora), there was intense pressure to conform to the norms of the market economy. For Jenita, business life was described as inflexible and demanding, not least due to the fixed hours of each day where she needed to supervise her water business. Mama Mrangi's business life was extremely cumbersome. Awkward hours, long walking distances in the absence of public transport, and unpredictable and geographically-shifting vegetable supply sources created a constant sense of fatigue and insecurity. For others, a good day's business might mean closure at the end of the day. On other days it was necessary to work into the evening, unsettling family routines. One participant described this anxiety and pressure:

Now I have to make sure that everyday I have an item to sell. I search everywhere for items no matter how far it is. Because if I don't make business, I am finished. And I have to leave home very early to search for vegetables before my husband leaves so that my kids especially the small ones don't stay alone without a husband. I can't afford a day without making a sale. Even the day which we meet at the (scheme) Office I carry my business with me.

(Mama Mrangi, 09/08/2005)

The market logic therefore presents women with a number of challenges: fierce competition, customer expectations and multiple demands. Market competition was visible to most women with many (small) firms all producing homogeneous goods. Mama Mrangi for example complained that there were more vendors than customers. It was only Jenita with her water business who enjoyed near monopoly conditions in her chosen sector.

Daily business norms were only some of the disciplining devices working on and through these women. The creditworthiness of the borrower, high interest rates, group pressure, weekly and monthly meetings, and regular repayments ensured women's maximum conformity to the norm of the successful entrepreneur. Interest rates were a particular cause of pressure with the NGOs charging levels well beyond those of formal lending institutions. Mikopo for instance charged 30% annually whilst the rural bank which was funding its activities charged 26%. Maarufu's interest rate ranged from 22% to 30%, with small loans attracting the highest rates. Like many NGOs, Maarufu required women to form groups in order to act as collateral, to attend meetings and make payments in very short time cycles. Mikopo explicitly involved husbands as guarantors. In all cases, women in the study felt that these arrangements subjected them to enormous social controls. Jenita, for

example, felt that Maarufu's system 'stretched' her daily routine as she was also required to attend the NGO office and monitor the performance of the other group members. In her own words:

I need to make sure they are also able to pay their weekly debt. If you don't make a follow up, some group members may disappear. I have heard women in other groups experiencing such a problem and they ended up paying for the disappeared woman... I treat this as a fulltime job because the scheme repayment schedule is tight. At least every week you have to be here once. And the other days you have to work on your business and also follow up on your group members to see how they are doing. This is what I hate about this scheme.

(Jenita, 10/07/2005)

Notwithstanding these irritations, Jenita had been able to conform to the NGOs requirements and was rewarded by being made eligible for a bigger loan. Mama Mrangi, on the other hand, felt that her involvement in the scheme has made her life worse than it was when she had to raise her own capital. She was particularly pressed by the group solidarity approach, explaining that '...sometimes we have problems especially when one or more members can't manage to raise the money. This sometimes makes us come home very late and quarrel with our husbands' (Mama Mrangi 09/08/2005). Discussing the implications of non repayment, Mama Mrangi and her group members were required to visit the homes of other group members in order to retrieve sufficient family furniture with which to recover Maarufu's money. She has experienced her fellow women being beaten, insulted and divorced by their husbands because of loans. From this perspective, microcredit was a dangerous form of business:

It is better to live with these worries rather than of having your group members in your house collecting your furniture/equipment. I know its implications I have been in other members' houses. Some have been insulted by their husbands, some beaten and some divorced. People from the neighborhoods come over to the house and learn about the woman's foolishness. It is embarrassing. I think this is what makes husbands furious.

(Mama Mrangi, 09/08/2005)

Maarufu requires that Mama Mrangi and her group members pay back their loans in weekly installments. She is, nevertheless, discontented with this arrangement, feeling that it is impossible to operate small-scale businesses under such conditions, especially in her situation where a 'good' daily profit is equivalent to 70-80 US cents. Putting this down to inexperience from the NGO, she explained:

Paying back the loan every week is not easy at all. You even see the big banks don't do this because they know it is not easy. So these inexperienced NGOs just decided so without foreseeing its implications to a poor person like me. Every day we hear that (even) rich peoples' houses are being sold by banks because they fail to payback their loans. So it is not easy'.

(Mama Mrangi, 09/08/2005)

Mama Mrangi was not alone in repeating stories of colleagues who had failed to make their repayments on time. The consequences – the forced removal of family belongings, withdrawal of credit and domestic conflict - appeared to transcend the risk scenarios negotiated by traditional (male) business operators. Here, the values of competition and achievement as well as reward and punishment were thoroughly ingrained into women's imaginations and had the potential to reinforce their gendered identities.

5.2 Gender and Development

Women in the study suggested that microcredit schemes deepened processes and forms of oppression and hence gender inequalities. Notwithstanding the huge resources invested in microcredit initiatives in Tanzania, women continue to engage in businesses that are within the traditional division of labour based on existing gendered identities. Beyond these businesses, despite their increased income and ownership of assets, women are still subordinated to their husbands, extended families and the community. In all cases, the affiliation of the women to their extended families including in-laws was still very strong. Here, these senior family members were approached for authorization before the women could participate in microcredit. Indeed, the extended family remains 'a social arrangement in which an individual has extensive reciprocal duties, obligations and responsibilities to his/her relations outside his nuclear family' (Nakunya, 1992, p. 47). In this regard a set of behaviors, expectations and responsibilities continue to constitute culturally the role of women as wives and mothers. In the extended family system, close ties exist between husbands and their own parents. This facilitates the pervasive influence of relatives on the life and decisions of husbands and in turn on women. Importantly for the purposes of this study, the involvement in microcredit of Mama Mrangi, Debora and Mbagala woman was withheld from their husbands and extended families. Women provided different reasons to defend their actions. Mama Mrangi explained:

...women, we are not expected to have any debts. Men will talk bad about you. But with men it is ok. They are expected to search for any alternative in order to make money for the family. So people will be surprised what was this woman was looking for while she is married!

In our tradition is not good to have loans. It is just not a good habit to go around and borrow money or things. If you go around borrowing, people think your family is not taking care of you and they are mean to their relative. So if you do so you paint a bad image of your family name. So if the woman goes out and borrows, this implies that your husband is not undertaking his responsibilities. He will be despised by everyone. And if you are not married, then your parents did not brought you up well. Men don't even consider marrying you. In short it is immoral'.

(Mama Mrangi 20/01/2006)

Many women therefore argued that they were left with no choice other than to keep their business interests secret from their families. As for Mama Muro, she received permission from her late husband and her mother in law. The idea of joining Mikopo came to Mama Muro after her husband's prolonged illness which prohibited him from providing adequately for his family. She felt that his decision to allow the loan was based on his declining health and sense of powerlessness: 'He said I should not miss the opportunity because he was helpless and he did not think he would recover' (Mama Muro 23/09/2005). Habiba received permission from her brother who guaranteed her loan. Although she felt that it was wrong for her to join the scheme, she referred to the approval given by the extended family, especially her brother:

They know my husband deserted me and I had to think of something...I don't have any problem with them. They know my experiences. They have been supporting me. They have been struggling to assist me especially my brothers.

(Habiba, 11/05/2006)

Not only did Mgeni's husband know about his wife's loan arrangement with Mikopo, it was on his initiative that she approached the NGO hoping to receive money with which to purchase a refrigerator for domestic use. When learning that she would need to submit and follow a business plan her husband agreed that a business venture was acceptable. Nevertheless, an acquiescing husband was no guarantee of a stable social situation:

...my in-laws are not happy. They feel I control my husband's resources. They think the business belongs to their relative (Abu). So they are not happy. My mother in-law is unhappy. She would like me out of this marriage.

(Mgeni, 10/11/2005)

Permission for Sikitu to join the scheme was also complicated, with her husband stipulating a number of conditions:

One, he said I should ensure that my business is confined within our family compound. Two, he said I should know I am still responsible for all house chores and children rearing. Three, he said I should know there is only one husband in the house. Four, if he would notice any change in my behavior, he will stop me from involving myself with the scheme. Five, I am accountable to him and not to the scheme, its orders or plans. His orders and plans should be my priority. Five, all the teachings and directions I got from the scheme should remain on Mikopo's walls.

(Sikitu, 14/10/2005)

Here, Sikitu subjugated herself in order to get her husband's approval. However, she defended her actions, referring to the 'negative' change observed in many other women involved in such schemes:

...many women are not allowed by their husbands to join in the NGOs activities because once they join the scheme they change. They do not respect their husbands anymore. They start to be out on the streets and neglecting their duties as wives. They don't respond to their husbands' orders anymore. Some women have just left their husbands complaining that they have been oppressed.

(Sikitu, 14/01/2006)

Ultimately, Sikitu was prepared to accept her husband's terms because of a deep insecurity that his untimely death would leave her vulnerable. It was unclear why Sikitu believed that her husband would die before her but this helped to justify her position. She explained that she had always depended on him, a situation that worried her. She wanted to be independent because she knew that after her husband's eventual death she would be left with nothing. As such, she needed to have an income generating activity in place in order to be able to take care of her four children.

...what I wanted was to have something which can generate an income. Before, I was dependent on him for everything. But this situation scared me sometimes. I asked myself: what will happen if my husband will die? His family will take everything from me. And I have four children. I needed something to generate income.

(Sikitu, 14/01/2006)

For Jenita, however, the approval of her husband was sufficient. As in Mgeni's case, Jenita was encouraged to join the business sector after experiencing long-term unemployment. Her husband investigated the possibilities for securing a microcredit facility without involving his wife. Having

reached his decision that a small business was feasible he informed Jenita of her new future! However, even though she had the support of her husband, Jenita's extended family were hostile:

They are not happy, especially my mother in-law. They don't like the fact that most of my time I am in the business. They criticize me for letting my children be raised by the house girl. But the good thing is that my husband always defends me in family meetings. My mother in-law is not happy with that too. It is really becoming a problem. Nowadays if I travel (on business) we don't tell them.

(Jenita, 10/07/2005)

Debora's extended family were extremely bitter, especially after learning that she had joined the scheme against her husband's wishes. Once uncovered, she was 'ordered' to stop associating with the NGO and her business interests and, instead, revert to taking full care of her children and the family house. Mbagala woman kept her involvement with Maarufu secret from her husband for precisely these reasons: 'when I told my husband about it he objected, but I joined all the same and secretly started taking loans and repaying them'. However after her group members visited her house to recoup her debts, her involvement in the business became a critical issue for her marriage and social position. She explained: 'Now that my group members have visited me at home it has ruined everything. My relationship with my husband is not good at all. My in-laws when they will hear about this, it will be crisis. I can't even imagine'.

The stigma of involvement in loan activities also had implications for women's standing within their communities. Habiba, for example had lost her potential to remarry because of her new status:

No one would consider marrying me now because I have complicated my life. They say men are scared of women with cars and who own resources. And as you can see I am driving. Men are scared because I am not dependent on my husband. I will be another boss in the house. I will not wait for him to pay for family expenses. Our men do not like that. By doing so, you will be denying them, their role as husbands and fathers.

(Habiba, 11/05/2006)

Mama Muro goes further, feeling that she has disqualified herself from remarrying by her new-found independence. She says many men who would have been prospective husbands already considered her in sarcastic tones as their 'fellow man', believing that she was 'aggressive' like men. Indeed, she claimed to buy drink for herself and for the men around her, and to provide for her children without the support of a male, all acts of defiance in a world structured on the premise of the submissive wife and mother.

Entrepreneurship as career and practice is inscribed with certain meanings and gendered implications. Despite the fact that Habiba was described as a successful businesswoman, she believed entrepreneurship, 'as a career', was 'mainly male'. The gift of being able to take initiatives, risks and deal with failures was thought to be a male quality. In this vein, it was assumed by many of the women that only men possessed the ability to operate in complex networks. Here, Habiba explained that a business career was 'very demanding' and sometimes requires an entrepreneur to attend business deals at awkward hours and sites, for example hotels and bars. In this sense, her chances to involve herself fully in her own business were very limited once she decided to enter a sector that was viewed as being structured by male norms and customs.

5.3 Microcredit as a Tool for Women's Empowerment and Resistance

The values of microcredit-financed entrepreneurship demand that women be independent, self-determining and empowered to participate fully within their communities. The women in this study certainly saw improvements and gains resulting from their participation in these schemes. Habiba, for example, thought that she was now able to take responsibility for the future of her children. She went further still by adding capital to her son's own business. This was her *real* success and she underscored her new capacity to act beyond her previous gendered identity:

At least now I can think like a man. You see I have used this opportunity to give my son a business. That's what men have been doing all along to help their family members. We women were asleep. My son worked with it (the loan). He started with a very small shop. When I got a loan of 3,000,000 TShs. my son decided to buy a car which we used as a taxi and my son himself became the taxi driver. He made good money and we were able to pay the loan back. That is when my son thought we should now go for a big business. He told me to borrow 10,000,000 TShs. We are doing well.
(Habiba, 06/08/2005)

She continued:

I had this understanding that women can't head her household alone comfortably. I have been through a lot of difficulties in trying to raise my children alone until I had an opportunity to get a loan from the scheme. I wish I had this opportunity much earlier. We would have been very rich. The scheme has changed me a lot. Now I know I can handle my own affairs without a husband.
(Habiba, 06/08/2005)

Many studies have shown that women involved in microcredit are empowered to challenge their existing conditions. Whilst evident in this study, it appears that the most profound impact of involvement in microcredit has been a new awareness of the subjective conditions that structure participants' daily lives and life possibilities. This was often expressed in positive terms, but equally as ambivalence. For Jenita a change in the subjective conditions of her life created via entrepreneurship enabled her to reflect on her marriage and its power dynamic. Here, she repeatedly stressed the confidence she has developed since she started running her own businesses. For Jenita, microcredit has played a valuable role in reducing vulnerability in her relationship with her husband through her ability to generate wealth:

In the past years before the microcredit scheme he could just take me back to my parents just like this. But now he does not have such options as before.....I know it. Now he needs me more than ever before. I am economically viable.
(Jenita, 09/04/2006)

Whilst access to credit allows woman to renegotiate their positions in relationships, this seemed to be the case only under very specific circumstances. For example, Jenita has been able to invest her new capital profitably in businesses that are similar to those undertaken by her husband but where he had little success in raising funds himself. Jenita's eligibility for microcredit has helped to strengthen her bargaining position in the relationship because her capital (loan) has been invested in a joint activity in which both spouses participate and contribute in an important way. Jenita felt that her marriage was now stronger and more equal than ever. She had also developed a sense of ownership of what before was perceived to be her husband's property. When she was asked about the ownership of assets in the household and businesses, she suggested: 'No they are not mine

alone. How can it be? They belong to our family. My husband is just a boss of the businesses and I undertake everyday businesses activities when he is at work’.

As importantly, women who were identified by development agents as average (lukewarm) or as failures had some positive developments through the working of subjectivity. Mbagala woman for example felt that she now had ‘freedom from dependence’ on her husband. Mama Muro said the loan from the scheme had enabled her to meet the ‘basic needs of her children’. She said she was now ‘free to choose’ what to do and where to go and to make decisions about her own children. She underscored her freedom from dependence on her extended family:

...(the scheme) is my only hope for the time being...I can survive with my children...it is something...I have been using this money to pay for my children’s education.

(Mamo Muro, 20/09/2005)

Mama Muro felt that her relationship with her in-laws had changed for the better. Now, she had the approval of her mother in-law to engage in the men’s world of business. Sikitu also had feelings of being ‘independent for the first time’ in her life.

For many women, negotiating these new values amidst a discourse of tradition was complex and required the establishment of a form of ‘counter culture’ (Willis, 1977). Many were able to articulate very clearly the societal expectations facing woman but developed strategies of resistance, manipulation and obedience towards men in order to achieve their goals. Some kept their involvement in business secret, but such strategies of resistance were pursued in quite different ways. Mama Mrangi did not seek the permission of any member of her family before taking part in the scheme. Even when she married, she did not involve her husband. Both Debora and Mbagala woman tried to obtain their husband’s consent but failed and then joined schemes anyway. These three women took bold decisions and in doing so were able to confront but also avoid the judgments and sanctions of male-dominated relationships in Tanzania.

Others came to an agreement with their husbands (Jenita, Sikitu, Mgeni, and Mama Muro) or a male family member (Habiba) and they used different strategies to accommodate these agreements. Jenita, for example, manipulated and somehow managed to curtail her husband’s control over her. In the process, though, she became aware of the insecurities built into her marriage. She came to understand that her husband’s implicit agenda of using her and microcredit to start his own business was a useful way to strengthen her own marriage *and* earn money! She explained that her insecurities were due to the established tendency of many men in Tanzania to abandon their independent wives in order to marry younger, dependent women. She felt now that her husband needed to think carefully before making such a decision.

6. Towards a conclusion

The impact of microcredit schemes on female entrepreneurs in urban Tanzania can only be fully understood by treating as central to the subjective meaning-making *processes* of these women. Individuals’ subjective accounts are vital to understand because they are located within the lived realities of actors (Mbilinyi 1992, p.65). They thus provide an opportunity for exploring realities that have been marginalized by conventional development approaches which prioritise *outcomes*. This approach enables research and analysis to focus on the human dimensions of such interventions and the complex experiences that are created by them. It offers a more subtle understanding of the local contexts of development that better reflects people’s everyday lived realities.

Microcredit programmes have widely heterogeneous impacts which can affect the bargaining power of women. By focusing on the dimensions of learning and subjectivity within these kinds of interventions we have been able to bring to life the aspirations and fears as well as the possibilities, complexities, and dilemmas that women face in their everyday lives while engaging in contemporary development practices. Such a focus enables us to understand that the possibility of women's empowerment and emancipation are inextricably intertwined with their diverse and multiple experiences as women, wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, daughters in law, and widows. Women in the study struggled to construct identities and agency as women enterprise-creators among multiple and contradictory positions. The practice of negotiating spaces for pursuing both the values built into the position of the independent, self determined entrepreneurial citizen and those connected to traditional discourses of service and subservience are thus extremely complex. The assessment of microcredit interventions and their consequences for women will only be complete when such perspectives are taken into account. A broader perspective on microcredit and its consequences should build upon the following reflections.

First, whilst microcredit initiatives have their origins in concerns for social justice and the alleviation of poverty, the study suggests that donor and national agendas prioritise issues of economic growth. Whilst most policy makers would suggest that the latter is critical to the former, this study suggests that the connections are complex and weak. There is an implicit assumption built into microcredit programmes that 'successful' involvement leads to improved living standards and greater freedoms. In this sense, the meaning of 'empowerment' through microcredit needs to be examined further. The study suggests that some women create the conditions for partial control or autonomy in their lives but that this must be attempted within the existing (and largely unchallenged) social structures of Tanzanian society. Mikopo, an NGO that insists on the involvement of husbands as guarantors, builds such structural constraints into its very programmes. Similarly, the practical and political necessity that many enterprises are located in and around the family home deserves closer analysis and should lead to cautious claims about the efficacy of microcredit for political transformation.

Second, irrespective of the theoretical lens one adopts – and studies of microcredit can be broadly categorised as being grounded in theories of rational choice, Marxist-inspired conflict or post-structuralism – it is clear that the ambition to empower women must find form through interventions and systems that work *on* and *through* actors. As many scholars have noted, microcredit is an especially pervasive system of self-governance, reforming the subject along the lines required by the capitalist mode of production. Some women in the study were able to create high(er) value-added enterprises, thus avoiding some of the worst effects of oppressive repayment regimes. Others were trapped in intolerable cycles of work, risk, low-reward and repayment. The consequences of such business regimes for the construction of identity is thoroughly under-researched.

Third, resistance is nevertheless possible within the microcredit schemes presented here. In their different ways, the women in this study all attempted – some more successfully than others – to break out of the moulds constructed for them. It is clear, though, that they rejected the notion of equality on which much microcredit discourse is based. Rather, they worked within prevailing power structures to 'probe' for ruptures and possibilities that might create more space to practice limited but meaningful forms of self-determination. In all cases, this resulted in a much bounded form of resistance, and it is far from clear what the longer term effects are for women who have begun to understand the conditions under which they endure marriages, household roles and extended family relationships. In this regard, we are certainly witnessing the birth of new

subjectivities and the flowering of a form of reflectivity that may well have deep but unpredictable consequences in the future.

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