

Women's economic empowerment and poverty: lessons from urban Sudan

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between women's economic empowerment and poverty in urban Sudan. A total of 250 women were surveyed from 1st August -15th August 2014. Data were collected using simple random sampling taking Sennar state in Sudan as a case study. The cumulative women's economic empowerment index (WEEI) is constructed based on two dimensions. The particular dimensions of economic empowerment that were taken are: a). Family Economic Decision b) Women Personal Independence. The non poor and poor were classified using one US dollar a day as poverty line. The study reveals that Women with low family economic decision index (EDX) are mostly poor. Also the study indicates that highest incidence of poverty among women with low control over their personal income. The paper concludes that Women with no assets, Women with no private business, women with no education and women with high economic dependency are mostly poor.

1. Introduction

The majority of poor people on the African continent are women, situating women in the growth agenda in Africa is fundamental to poverty reduction. Statistics indicate that women are more likely than men to be poor and at risk of hunger because of the systematic discrimination they face in education, health care, employment and control of assets (UNIFEM, 2009) (World Bank 2012). Economic empowerment of women is not only crucial to the achievement of gender equality but it is also crucial in achieving economic growth and the eradication of poverty. There is extensive microeconomic analysis of the ways in which gender inequality limits productivity, output and growth (UNDP, 2008). Women in underdeveloped countries whether formally employed or not, also shoulder the burden of unpaid activities arising from low levels of access to clean water and energy sources. Gender differences in access to assets limits the options of women, women have very limited access to education and information; Illiteracy rates among women are very high; Women's participation in public life is restricted.

Sudan ranks among the lowest group of countries in terms of human development, rated 169 out of 187 countries (UNDP 2013). The incidence of poverty in Sudan is high, with 46.5 percent of the population is below the poverty line. There is also significant variation in the incidence of poverty between urban and rural areas as well as between states in the Federation. The incidence of poverty in Sennar state is 44.1 percent (Mohamed, N. 2015). With respect to gender equity issues, Sudan ranks 128 out of 146 countries, reflecting extreme disparities across the country. In Sudan women account for nearly half of the society, the twenty-two year conflict, that consumed much of the country's resources, played a major role in hindering the process of women's empowerment in this country. There is growing evidence that the number of women in Sudan living in poverty has increased, through no reliable estimates of its depth and intensity are available. Women's participation in the market economy has increased, especially in the informal sector (Shahira, & Amira, 2009), however at the same time women's domestic workloads have not declined. Women in Sudan continue to be primarily responsible for such activities as the care of children and the elderly members of the household, cooking and cleaning, and managing the household in general. The

problem here appears to be not in the lack of opportunity, once women have entered the workforce, but rather in giving them access to the educational training and basic rights. Very few studies have been attempted to address the issue of economic empowerment of Sudanese women (Shahira, & Amira 2009).

Taking urban women as a target group and reference point, this paper attempts to investigate the relationship between women's economic empowerment and poverty in urban Sudan. It is hoped that this paper will help policy makers realize their poverty reduction goals by laying the foundation for analytical work aimed at an in-depth understanding of the correlation between women's economic empowerment and poverty in Sudan. The paper begins with background information about women's empowerment and poverty in Sudan. Section 2 discusses women's economic empowerment concepts and measures. Section 3 explains the methodology and techniques employed. Section 4 includes the findings and discussion. The conclusion and policy implications are included in the last section.

2. Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment

UNDP (2008) defines women's empowerment through five major components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence positively the direction of social change. UNDP (2010) concludes that empowerment is the ability of people to make strategic choices in areas that affect their lives. There is no single definition of women's empowerment in the literature. It is generally accepted however that efforts to measure women's empowerment need to consider different levels (micro/macro, individual/collective), different spheres (economic, political, social) and must be sensitive to social context (ICRW 2011).

Sida (2009) defines women's economic empowerment as "the process which increases women's real power over economic decisions that influence their lives and priorities in society. Sida's definition of women's economic empowerment goes beyond the market and also encompasses change in relation to access to and control over critical economic resources and opportunities; it also addresses the need to eliminate structural gender inequalities in the labor market. World Bank focuses principally on markets, that is, "making markets work for women and empowering women to compete in markets". Access to markets is important because inequality prevents women from having equal access to productive resources and economic opportunities (World Bank, 2007). The majority of efforts to measure women's economic empowerment programs focus primarily on quantitative outcomes - such as increased access to credit or increased business revenue even where the stated objectives include broader empowerment goals. As is often noted in the literature, positive outcomes in financial terms do not necessarily equate to empowerment (Allendorf, 2007).

Women's empowerment is multidimensional and it is very difficult to measure. It comprises the entire complex of interactions, roles, rights and statuses that surround being male versus being female in a given society or culture (Mason, 2005). However, in the present paper an attempt has been made to measure women's economic empowerment in the domestic sphere (household) by constructing women economic empowerment index. The particular aspects or dimensions of economic empowerment that were taken are: a). Family Economic Decision b) Women Personal Independence. The index of each dimension was constructed where minimum and maximum values were chosen for each underlying indicator. Performance in each indicator is expressed as the minimum and maximum value between 0 and 1 in accordance with the construction method of the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2005) and (Elsheikh & Eamin, 2013) (see table 1) .The Women Economic Empowerment Index (WEEI) is then computed in a simple average of these two indices according to the formula below:

WEEI =

$1/2$ (Women Personal Independence index (PIX)) + $1/2$ (Family Economic Decision Index (EDX))

Index			
Personal Independence Index (PIX)	Usually (1)	Sometime (1/2)	Never (0)
1. Control over personal income			
2. Exposure to media: Watching T.V and reading newspaper/magazines	Usually (1)	Sometime (1/2)	Never (0)
3. Visiting hospital			
4. Visiting markets			
Family Economic Decision Index (EDX)			
1. Household Purchases like furniture and other items			
2. Education/expense of children			
3. Purchasing Medical treatment of family.			
4. Purchasing daily food			

Table (1): Women’s Economic Empowerment Measures

3. Methodology and Techniques

The data used in this study are based on cross-section survey conducted in the capital of Sinnar State, named Singa between 1st August and 15th August 2014. It covers a sample of 250 women. The sample selection was based on stratified random sampling with multi-stage selection. The sample size to each geographical location (Hayyi) is proportional to its population size. The information was collected using a pre-tested questionnaire. A cumulative index for women economic empowerment was constructed using two indices (1) Family economic decision index (2) Women Personal Independence index). Table 2 and 3 show the interpretations of the women personal independence index (PIX) and the family economic decision index (EDX) respectively. Table 4 displays the Women Economic Empowerment Index (WEEI) Interpretation (Elsheikh & Eamin, 2013).

Women Personal Independence Index (PIX)	Strength of the Index
3 - 4	High
1 -less than 3	Low
Less than 1	No

Table 2: Women Personal Independence Index (PIX) Interpretation

Family economic decision index ((EDX)	Strength of the Index
3 - 4	High
1 -less than 3	Low
Less than 1	No

Table 3: Family Economic Decision (EDX) Interpretation

WEEI = 1/2 (Women Personal Independence Index) + 1/2(Family Economic Decision Index)	Strength of the Index
3 - 4	High

1-less than 3	Low
Less than 1	No

Table 4: Women Economic Empowerment Index (WEEI) Interpretation

This study used an absolute poverty line (\$1 per day) as the threshold below which a woman can be identified as poor. \$1-a day poverty lines have been used widely in the recent year to claim that poverty has not come down in spite of historically high rates of world economic growth. Mohamed (2015) indicates that about half of the Sudanese are poor. The study uses SDG 7 per person per day (equivalent to one US dollar at the time) as poverty line. The various characteristics of the different poverty groups (poor and non-poor) were compared to shed light on the relationship between of poverty and women’s economic empowerment. The headcount poverty index (HCI) is defined as the percentage of the population whose living standards lie below a given “poverty line” (World Bank, 2003).

$$HCI = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^q N_i = \frac{Nq}{N}$$

HCI = the head count index; Nq = the number of women under poverty line; N= the total number of sample size.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table (5) shows that the majority of the women (54.4%) with no economic empowerment and has no both the ability to advance economically and the power to make and act on decisions. More than half of women in the sample cannot take any decision to control over their income and lacking personal independency. Also the result indicates that the majority of women cannot take any decision related to their family economic status.

WEEI	Number of women	Percentage
High	52	20.8
Low	62	24.8
No	136	54.4

Table 5: Percentages of Women with High, Low, and No Economic Empowerment index (WEEI) among the Total Respondents

Table (6) shows that about 59.2 % of women are poor compared with 40.8 % that are non poor. This result indicates that high poverty incidence among Sudanese women in urban area.

Poverty status	Number of women	Headcount Poverty Index (HCI)%
Non- poor	102	40.8
Poor	148	59.2
Total	250	

Table 6: Percentages of Poor and Non poor among the Total Respondents

Table (7) indicates that about 71.6 % of poor women lacking economic empowerment. This result reveals that women with WEEI index less than 1 are mostly poor. By contrast the cross section analysis shows that 39.2% of non poor women have high WEEI index (40 women out of 102) and about 31.4 % with Low WEEI. This finding indicates that improving women’s economic empowerment in urban area may lead to decrease poverty among women. Table (8) displays that women with no or low family economic decision index (EDX) are mostly poor. About 49.02 % with high WEEI index are non- poor women, by contrast only 2% of women with high WEEI index are poor. Woman who does not take any family economic decisions related to household purchases, education/expense of children, purchasing medical treatment of family and purchasing daily food are mostly poor.

WEEI	Poor	Percentage among the Total Poor	Non-poor	Percentage among the Total Non-poor
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High	12	8.1	40	39.2
Low	30	20.3	32	31.4
No	106	71.6	30	29.4
Total	148		102	

Table 7: Women Economic Empowerment (WEEI) and Poverty Status

EDX	Poor	Percentage among the total poor	Non poor	Percentage among the total non-poor
High	2	1.35	50	49.02
Low	20	13.54	42	41.08
No	126	85.11	10	9.80
Total	148		102	

Table 8: Family Economic Decision ((EDX) and Poverty Status

As shown in table (9) the study indicates that highest incidence of poverty among women with no assets (about 79%), Women with no private business (94.2%) and women with no education (93 %). Also the result indicates that women with high economic dependency are mostly poor (90%).

Women Economic Empowerment Indicators	%Poor	%Non- poor
Women with no assets	79	21
Women with no private business	94.2	4.8
Women with no education	93	7
Women with high economic dependency ratio	90.7	9.3

Table 9: Women Economic Empowerment Indicators and Poverty Status

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This paper attempts to investigate the relationship between women's economic empowerment and poverty using urban women in Sudan as sampling unit. While this paper uses descriptive statistics to investigate this relationship, analytical analysis is highly needed to examine the significance of this relationship. Some conclusions could be drawn from the estimated results and the following policy implications of the study stand out.

Investing in increase women economic empowerment to reduce poverty should be a matter of great priority in under developing country like Sudan. Economic empowerment through provision of income generating activities should be an important element of poverty reduction policies. In order to enable women to develop their full economic potential there is a need to improving women access to private business, and access to and control over financial services including banking, and business development. It is very important to establish small and medium enterprises, and moving into product development. The importance of women education in increasing women economic empowerment should be noted. Education can play a vital role in bringing about the desirable behavioral changes among the women and make them well equipped in terms of knowledge, competence and capacity to deal with different economic problems. To raise the income of the poor women the policies should be focused on improving the market opportunities to them. Such a policy could also have an impact on increasing the women contribution and participation in the national economy.

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