

Chapter 9

Women's Economic Empowerment in the Developing Countries: Reengineering Patriarchy?

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ABSTRACT

It is an established fact that women's empowerment is primary to the socio-economic and political development of a nation. It will be meaningless, if women that constitute half of the population of the globe do not have access to education, healthcare, employment and political decision making bodies. A nation benefits fully when both men and women contribute rigorously in social cohesion, economic growth, peace and prosperity. Findings from countries and reputable institutions such as World Bank and the United Nations revealed that greater gender equality correlates positively with national economic growth. The World Economic Forum recently reported that across the 135 countries examined, greater gender equality correlates positively with per capita gross national product. Countries with greater equality between women and men have economies that are more competitive and fast growing. Hence, removing barriers on empowering women stimulates economic development. This chapter commences with the meaning of women empowerment followed by the identification of various barriers on women empowerment, and investigation on women economic empowerment in the developing countries. The patriarchal system is also introduced to explain how it influences women empowerment. Finally, this chapter argues that women empowerment in general can only be achieved if the patriarchal system is transformed or reengineered to foster more equality between both groups.

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INTRODUCTION

Women are unequal to men in all aspects in the developing world and gender disparity is more prevalent among poor people (World Bank, 2001). International attention on the discrimination of women was raised in the 1970s, when the United Nations (UN) convened its first World Conference on the Status of Women, in Mexico City in 1975. It marked a new era at the international level when it opened a worldwide dialogue on gender equality. It also marked a sharp difference among the women gathered there reflecting the politics and economic realities at that time. While women from the Eastern Block were more concerned with peace issues, women in the West pressed more for equality while those in the developing countries prioritised issues relating to development. The UN, as an international organization, continued to promote gender equality through its track records in organizing the second world women conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1980, the third one in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985 and the fourth in Beijing, China, in 1995 (UN Women, 2000).

The Beijing Conference was significant because it marked the beginning of the struggle for gender equality. It also called for total restructuring of the entire society in order to re-evaluate the relationship between men and women. It was argued that through these practices, women could be truly empowered to take their rightful place as equal partners of men in all aspects of life. Women's rights are human rights and gender equality has become a universal concern. Twelve critical areas were identified namely; women in environment, women in power and decision-making, the girl child, human rights, women and education and training, violence against women, women and poverty, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, women and health, women in armed conflict, women and media as well as women and the economy. They also identified the obstacles to women's advancement in the respective areas. It required strong commitment from the respective national governments to remove the identified barriers (UN Women, 2000). In the post-Beijing era, in the context of women and poverty, although overall poverty had declined, many women were still trapped in poverty. Over 60% of the women in the developing countries engaged in various types of informal employment, meaning unstable earnings and high risks of poverty (UNIFEM, 2005).

The economic participation of women is vital not only in reducing poverty among the women, but also an important step towards raising household income and encouraging economic development in the country as a whole. However, it shows that there are several barriers impeding economic empowerment and patriarchy is the most prevalent one (World Economic Forum, 2005).

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Women's economic empowerment is an achievement of women to be able to choose and control their economic activities and incomes. It is also an enhancement of women's rights to enable them to have control over their lives and also contribute to the society at large. The main objective of women's economic empowerment is to create just and equitable societies (OECD, 2011). In order to provide sufficient knowledge and understanding about women's economic empowerment, this section starts with broad definitions of relevant terms and concepts related to women's economic empowerment before exploring the context of economic empowerment for women in the developing countries

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