

UNEARTHING UNDERLYING CONSTRAINING FACTORS TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: A CASE FOR FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper discusses feminist political economy analysis (PEA) as a core tool for contextual analysis in relation to women's economic empowerment. Feminist PEA assesses the formal and underlying informal factors that impact women's performance in social, economic and political spheres, and how these might affect their economic empowerment. The paper also explores selected literature on women's incomes, livelihoods and labour participation so as to illustrate feminist concerns in normative practices, including cultural prescriptions, on the economic, political and social order; male domination over the economic and labour markets; and power relations in the production value chains such as the agricultural, dairy and energy value chains. Through an exploration of feminist issues and underlying factors that constrain the performance of market institutions the paper finds that often invisible factors, such as care work and domestic labour, significantly affect women's participation in economic activities and income generation. The feminist PEA is clearly an effective tool for unearthing how women's effectiveness as agents of economic change in the market is constrained by a myriad of informal underlying factors. The paper finds that feminist PEA richly provides a deeper perspective on contextual issues related to women's economic empowerment, and recommends a more deliberate implementation of policies and laws in order to minimize the negative impacts of the underlying factors that stymie women's economic empowerment. Of importance is the need for any policy reform aimed at enhancing women's economic empowerment to factor in measures for addressing unpaid reproductive labour, and a supportive environment to enable women's participation in entrepreneurship and the labour market.

Key Words: Feminist PEA, formal and informal factors, political economy analysis, stakeholder interests and influences, women's economic empowerment

Introduction

There is no single definition of political economy analysis (PEA). However, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) explains that PEA is concerned with “the interaction of political and economic processes in a society, the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time” (Department for International Development (DFID), 2009). At the centre of PEA is politics, that is, the contest between two competing groups and

economic processes. This contestation also implies “the process of generation of wealth and how political choices affect development outcomes at the individual, community and even broader” (Asian Development Bank, 2013).

Political economy analysis was further enriched when feminists took an interest in the underlying factors that were driving gender discrimination and inequalities in the economic, political and social

spheres. Feminist interest in PEA was concerned with the quiescent causes of *“skewed power relations and social stratification that left women at the bottom and men in a dominant position at the top”* (Kabeer, 2015). Below we explore the various components of PEA and the nexus between feminist PEA and women’s economic empowerment. Women’s economic empowerment (WEE) has been variously defined as *“the process through which women navigate contextual challenges in order to attain adequate access to and control over economic resources, and improved livelihoods”* (ODI, 2016; Taylor and Perezniето, 2014; CARE International, 2020). This paper explores the nexus between feminism and PEA, specifically reviewing how a feminist PEA has been utilized in different study contexts to assess WEE. Through a methodological approach that reviewed secondary empirical data and research studies, the paper situates feminist PEA within women’s economic empowerment discourses.

Core Components of Political Economy Analysis

Integral to PEA are several key elements, including the interests and incentives of different groups and how these influence policy outcomes; the role that formal and informal institutions play in shaping how people relate and interact; and, the impact of values, ideals and political behaviour (Whaites, 2017). PEA seeks to unearth underlying factors beneath the surface of a given situation. In so doing, it provides insights into political ideologies, organizational culture, norms and value systems, and religious factors that might have an effect on how people think or act, and what the competing interests might be (Whaites, 2017). PEA is also informed by ‘how things really get done’ and the nexus between formal and informal factors that inform how actors in a political system, cultural

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community or institution, operate (ODI, 2016; AusAID, 2016; Fritz et al, 2014). In this case formal institutions include laws and policies, and regulatory processes that define the systems of governance, while informal institutions include cultural norms, patronage networks and patriarchy, and how these influence decision-making processes (Whaites, 2017; Oxfam, 2014).

PEA also helps identify the most relevant policy responses and strategies that are likely to work in instances where there have been difficult and complex development challenges. Often, vested sectarian and political interests get in the way of well-meaning programme interventions, and this may not always be obvious to the researcher, necessitating the deeper analysis that a PEA offers. In the case of WEE, policy enablers, such as funds set aside by a government institution for financing women’s initiatives as well as supportive laws that prohibit gender-based discrimination may be in place. However, vested interests, cultural normative

practices, ethnic and other sectional discrimination may cause vulnerabilities that may block the actual implementation of WEE enabling policies.

This paper assesses how such underlying factors may interact with policy structures and how feminist PEA can unearth the blockages in the implementation process. In addition, through a feminist PEA, the paper seeks to understand why despite good practices and laws, and even a progressive constitution like Kenya's 2010 Constitution, reforms related to women's economic empowerment still take long to get rooted. For instance, why, despite the provision of a minimum representation threshold of one-third of either gender in the Constitution of Kenya (2010), has Kenya not yet been able to get women into Parliament, Constitutional Commissions, Parastatal Boards and other policy formulation and decision-making bodies? A feminist PEA offers a critical intervention, enabling a deeper understanding of the type of political incentives that have shaped the decisions of political parties, voters, the judiciary and other players, resulting in the skewed gender representation that we currently see in institutional formations in Kenya and other African jurisdictions.

Political Economy Analysis in Context

Political economy analysis gained fresh importance in the 1970s, when donor agencies tended to side-step political actors, having found their partisan interests too complex to navigate (Fritz et al, 2014). Political incentives often appeared incompatible with public interests. In the 1980s, the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) formed the policy paradigm for development, but the underlying political drivers became too strong for development to progress. With time, it became clear that there were other institutional factors, more popularly referred to as, 'rules of the game', that determined how things would

actually work out (Whaites, 2017:5). According to Fritz et al. (2014:2), "*Institutions underpin markets and provide the framework within which the bureaucracy acts and political contestation plays out*". Some of these institutional factors are guided by cultural normative practices, vested patronage interests such as corruption, power struggles, personalised economic benefits such as ploys to win procurement tenders, culturally and religiously ordained gender stereotypes and discrimination, among others.

Political economy analysis as an important analytical tool for development challenges gained traction in the 2000s with several development institutions such as the World Bank, the then Department for International Development (DFID), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the Government of the Netherlands, each initiating their own version of a PEA approach. Feminists also took an interest in PEA in the 2000s, after realizing that gender equality remained elusive despite heavy investments in time, development aid and government financial and policy interventions. PEA offered a good analytical tool of the latent obstacles to gender equality across different spheres, and thus drew the attention of feminist scholars and practitioners.

There are various versions and approaches to PEA, advanced by different institutions. A few of these versions are presented briefly below:

- The World Bank's *Problem Driven Political Economy Analysis*, which included a governance and anti-corruption strategy (Fritz et al., 2014): The problem driven approach is concerned with ensuring that PEA begins by diagnosing specific problems and unresolved developed challenges that require a resolution to be resolved.
- DFID'S *Drivers of Change* (DoC) analytical framework: DoC is an approach developed by the then DFID to address lack of linkages between the

political framework of a country and operations of development organizations operating in the country. It specifically assessed the interface between economic, political and social factors that either propel or constrain poverty reduction work (ODI, 2009).

- SIDA's *Power Analysis* approach: This is founded on the belief that power imbalances and asymmetries in access to financial, capital and economic resources must be resolved for poverty reduction to be achieved, (SIDA, 2005).
- *Feminist Political Economy Analysis*: Feminist

PEA began as a blend of feminist work in various disciplines, including economics; development studies; and politics (Griffin, 2007; Peterson, 2005). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, feminists felt that gender was missing in the mainstream PEA discourse and sought to bring it on board (Waylen, 1997; Griffin, 2007; Peterson, 2005). Feminist PEA is discussed in more detail in subsequent sections of this paper.

Feminist Political Economy Analysis

However, with all this thinking into PEA, the feminist PEA did not gain attention until more recently, after the year 2000 (Peterson, 2005; GSDRC, 2014). A feminist PEA puts the spotlight on gendered discrimination and inequalities, and how these are affected by skewed power relations in political, economic and social spheres. A feminist lens in PEA adds a layer of analysis to enable a more accurate understanding of gendered and other intersectional inequalities. Gender identities are reproduced by the processes of political economy, hence the need to assess these identities' differential impacts on women and men.

As noted by Peterson (2005), feminist interventions across various disciplines have over time exposed the omission of women's contributions to development and production processes – with women and feminised activities often presented as inferior, using androcentric criteria. For example, women's domestic, reproductive and caring labour is deemed 'lesser' compared to male production. Thus, male dominated activities (often paid work in the formal economy) along with masculinised characteristics, such as autonomy and competitiveness, are perceived to be the norm and more 'worthy'. Women, on the

other hand, are devalued and perceived to be inferior, subjective, natural and unskilled and thus assigned unpaid activities. Correcting this androcentric bias, to make women empirically more visible, should be a continuous project of the feminist discourse, and has informed feminist PEA thinking (Peterson, 2005; 2007; Griffin, 2007).

Feminist PEA has a broader perspective and focus on social policies, which encompass deeper analyses of the gender differentials in education, agriculture, labour rights; intra-household division of labour; access to economic resources; gendered wage patterns, unpaid care work, among others. It also allows for intersectional analysis that explores gender and how systems of power intersect and cause differentiated impacts on different groups in society (Women's International League on Peace and Freedom (WILPF), 2019). Thus, feminist PEA explores the following in development discourses:

- It seeks to understand the drivers of economic, political and social behaviour, incentives and perceptions; and enables identification of systemic gender discriminatory factors.
- It assesses the various gender-based contestations and bargaining between different

interest groups. More specifically, it enables understanding of the different stakeholders in a particular context, and the logic behind the decisions they make. This is achieved through a process of stakeholder mapping and analysis.

- It illuminates visible, invisible and hidden power that determines how things really get done. It sheds light on the constellations of power among women and men, signals who wields decision-making power at different levels, and how this affects women and men. It also shows how economic and labour opportunities, power and wealth are distributed, based on class, ethnic divisions, gender and other forms of identity (Kabeer, 2015: 2021).

In order to understand the above, a variety of useful tools are available that may be deployed to aid Feminist PEA, either on their own or in combination, based on the complexity of the issue under investigation. These tools are presented briefly below.

Multi-Layered Institutional Analysis

Institutions refer to “rules, norms and arrangements, or rules of the game” (Jones, 2005). Actors are the administrators or agents who oversee application of the ‘rules’. Formal rules include laws, policies and regulations that exist and guide operations in formal economic, social and political spaces and the market place. Informal rules and norms include patriarchy, patronage systems and cultural gender and normative practices that determine how things really get done (Whaites, 2017; ODI, 2016; Oxfam, 2014; Braunstein, 2008; Jones, 2005).

Capacity Needs Assessment

Capacity needs assessment is a critical part of PEA as it assesses whether the main actors have the

necessary capacity to act and voice their needs, be heard, self-organize and position strategically. A feminist PEA assesses women’s self-realization and identifies critical gender differentiated power imbalances that require attention (Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID, 2016). A core ingredient in nurturing women’s self-determination is building their skills and capabilities to achieve certain outcomes, and thus assess inherent capacities ‘to act and voice’ their needs and interests (agency) which is critical to feminist PEA (Kabira, 2015).

Stakeholder Mapping and Analysis

Stakeholders are the entire array of actors with interest or influence on a particular issue. They may either represent ‘change’ and also represent ‘non-reformists’, who do not embrace change and often tend to prefer the status quo (ODI, 2016). Where the government is a stakeholder, it cannot be construed to be a neutral actor as it is made up of individual men and women, who also harbour individual interests and influences. In addition, individuals have networks and varied motivation for the choices and decisions they make, some of which may be determined by patriarchal ideologies. Feminist PEA must keep track of gender differentiated power dimensions, including how formal and informal power is distributed among the different stakeholders.

Power Analysis

Power analysis is associated with SIDA, and it aims to identify where real power really rests. It is a tool that helps illustrate power distribution as well as potential conflicts of interests. This is best established where local expertise is deployed in the analysis (SIDA, 2005). From a feminist analytical perspective, it helps unearth visible and invisible power, culture-based authority and misogynistic trends and patterns.

Operationalizing PEA in Women's Economic Empowerment

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is affected by many constraining factors that are sometimes ignored, often inadvertently, in interventions by governments and other actors seeking to improve women's livelihoods. Some of these factors include inequalities in labour markets and gender relations, social norms and unpaid reproductive labour, particularly care work (Quisumbing, 2021; Kabeer, 2005; 2015; ILO, 2016; ODI, 2016). Naila Kabeer (2021) underscores livelihood inequality as a foundational cause for other forms of inequality, such as access to education, health care, various freedoms and decision-making. Kabeer advocates for transformative change from the stratified gender systems of economic and market spaces that place women at the bottom below men, to more equitable systems (2021). Unpaid care work is one of the contributing factors that cause women to remain at the bottom of this economic strata, with the going assumption being that this is 'women's natural role' without prying beneath such assumptions to unearth the causal factors. Feminist economists' work in this area led to a list of other contributing factors such as labour market discrimination leading to occupation hierarchy and women participating in labour markets on disadvantaged terms (Kabeer, 2005, 2015, 2021; Budlender, 2008). Under these terms, women continue to find themselves in less paying, more labour intensive and uncertain jobs.


By exploring how gender norms reinforce the power relations that subordinate women in economic, political and social spaces through various forms of oppression such as gender based violence (GBV), feminist PEA helps to peel off the layers that women must wade through to achieve self-actualization. Recent studies on gender gaps in returns on women's

labour found a list of compounding factors including gendered discrimination in access to education and finance; discriminatory regulations and inheritance laws; and unpaid work (Hallward-Driemeir, 2011; World Economic Forum, 2018). Other factors include a lack of infrastructure to reduce the burden of unpaid care work on women (Kabeer, 2021; Budlender, 2008).

An assessment of how gender intersects with distribution of formal and informal power in economic and labour market spaces reveals *"occupational hierarchies in the informal labour market, where men dominate the higher levels of paid formal jobs, while women dominate the lower echelons due to intersectional vulnerabilities, care work and gender discrimination"* (Kabeer, 2021: 17). Studies in Africa have provided further insights on several considerations beyond profitability that often inform women's entrepreneurial activities. Such considerations were found to include entrepreneurial skills and capability, the need to secure the family welfare, women's ability to hire extra labour and access to financing (Kennedy and Roelen, 2017; Kabeer, 2021; Muthuri et al., 2017). Cumulatively, these factors affect women's ability to progress to higher levels of the enterprise chains and ultimately achieve economic empowerment. Similarly, concerns over access to reliable and affordable child care services, among other factors such as low literacy; lack of skills; and work place discrimination affect women's access to gainful formal employment.

A randomised control trial in Kenya in 2017 that sought to establish how lowering the costs of childcare services through a voucher system would affect women's labour choices and market outcomes, found that women with subsidized childcare were

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17% more likely to be employed than those without (Clark et al., 2018, 2019). The study unearthed other underlying formal and informal factors that affect employment including economic incentives, bargaining power, social norms, among other factors. The conclusion was that policies that seek to impact WEE through labour markets and employment cannot be effective without considerations for easing unpaid care work. Clearly, balancing work and childcare remains a dilemma for many women in Kenya and elsewhere in developing countries. This implies that childcare centres are a critical link pin in improving women's income earning opportunities, as they enable women to balance between childcare and employment or entrepreneurship, without making them have to choose between their child care roles and whether to earn an income.

Economic and political policies are hardly ever gender neutral, and sometimes existing laws reinforce and sustain discriminative gender roles curtailing women's economic empowerment. The discussion above illuminates how distribution of formal and informal power in economic spaces affects women's economic

empowerment. In addition, visible, and invisible power through cultural norms, male domination and gendered discrimination, affects decision-making and distribution of resources, often leading to women's subordination and exclusion from the labour market. For instance, men tend to have wider social and business networks because they are better educated and are able to venture outside the confines of their domestic spaces unlike women. Despite the policy interventions by government and other agencies to spur women's economic empowerment through entrepreneurship, women's businesses remain small in scope and size and with a limited capital outlay (Kiriti-Ngángá and Kiiru, 2018). For women to navigate these constraints and strengthen their lobby position and participation in market spaces, there is clearly need for policy reform towards facilitative market infrastructure that pursues the enforcement of laws and implementation of existing policies. It is only then that access to credit, reduction of women's unpaid reproductive labour, and enhanced access to affordable and accessible childcare services, can be realised.

Summary

Often the major conflicts of interests related to power and control of entrepreneurship and market spaces revolve around access to and control over productive resources such as labour, assets and women's agency towards self-realization. Women's restricted access to resources such as land, financing, paid productive and reproductive labour, and the constraints from care work need to be addressed in order to safeguard women's economic empowerment. Women's access to economic resources can have positive outcomes for their voice and influence within the household. It is clear from the foregoing that gender inequalities are perpetuated and reinforced in the market and economic spaces in ways that limit women's contributions and economic progress (Kabeer, 2021). Therefore, in consonance with feminist PEA, we can

conclude that while individuals and associations, including women and their organizations, make choices and exercise agency, these are directly dictated by rules, norms, assets and capabilities available to them and allowed by the systemic institutional values.

While there have been significant efforts to address gendered inequalities in economic empowerment, such as those seen through government policies on affirmative action funds for women and the youth, and the Constitution of 2010 that gave express provisions on gender representation, inequalities in all spheres abound. Due to fundamental obstacles in the institutional structures and systemic practices equitable distribution representation in decision making platforms and legislative institutions, distribution of economic resources and job opportunities have remained a mirage. These obstacles have never been fully unearthed and addressed.

The social transformation sought through African feminist discourses will, therefore, remain elusive, as long as these obstacles remain beneath the surface. This paper argues that digging through political, social and economic institutions is paramount. In so doing, hidden interests and often androcentric machinations that affect effective implementation of policy provisions will be brought to the fore. And only when addressed will the much-sought social transformation be realized. Given the often notable disconnected loop between policy formulation and research evidence in Africa due to low research uptake by the government (Wanjiku, 2019), the value that would accrue from feminist PEA in the formulation of women's economic empowerment interventions may not be realized. There is a clear need to build research capacity and interest in feminist PEA, as a core component of the African feminist discourse.

Conclusion

Feminist PEA has demonstrated that women need negotiation and bargaining skills to navigate formal and informal political and economic engagements. Therefore, these skills should be strengthened by building a critical balance between women's productive and reproductive labour contributions. For women to achieve economic empowerment and sustained transformative change, critical success factors include individual and social capital through group interactions, enhanced with capabilities and skills building. In addition, support to access finance, complemented by entrepreneurship training, is critical. If women are to attain economic empowerment, they must be facilitated to access the labour markets and various entrepreneurial value chains, and not just be allowed to participate in the labour intensive production stages that are often poorly remunerated and less lucrative as compared to the higher levels of the entrepreneurial chains. Notably, these higher levels of the entrepreneurial chains are often dominated by men. Women require well anchored supportive market structures such as technology and technical capabilities, leading to better remunerated and more empowering occupations, just as much as the men.

It follows that there is need to ensure policy implementation in order to provide the needed safeguards and thus limit the various forms of discrimination against women in employment and entrepreneurship. While some countries such as Kenya have good labour market regulations and policies, their implementation is ineffective, and thus discrimination continues to constrain women's participation in the labour market and in economic activities. Furthermore, it is clear from existing literature that underlying factors that affect the effectiveness of policy interventions aimed at WEE include the burden of unpaid reproductive roles, implying the need to factor in measures to reduce this

burden. This study recommends that all WEE related policies should consider measures to address care work. Such measures should include, among others, provision of accessible, affordable and credible day-care facilities for pre-school children. This will allow the mothers, particularly in low-income households, who often have to make the difficult choice between

care work and paid labour often prioritizing care work, to access an easier option of affordable, accessible and credible childcare facilities. This will ensure that they are not denied the right to participate effectively in the labour market, or to venture into entrepreneurship; the two major pathways to women's economic empowerment.

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