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regulating motherhood through markets: Filipino women's engagement with microcredit

Sharmila Parmanand

abstract

The Philippines is a global leader in deploying microcredit to address poverty. These programmes are usually directed at women. Research on these programmes focuses on traditional economic indicators such as loan repayment rates but neglects impacts on women's agency and well-being, or their position in the household and relationships with their partners and children. It is taken for granted that access to microcredit leads to enhanced gender freedoms. In line with the growing body of work in feminist scholarship that critiques the instrumentalist logic of microfinance institutions (MFIs) in relation to women, this research foregrounds stories from interviews with female borrowers in Zamboanga City in Southern Philippines to provide grounded illustrations of how microcredit is reshaping relationships between women and their families, women and poverty and women and the state. Borrowers used loans to meet their family's needs even at the cost of harassment from creditors, indebtedness, increased workloads and conflict with partners. These narratives challenge the dominant neoliberal discourse of female empowerment through access to credit by exposing how microcredit is part of a complex set of regulations around 'good motherhood' and consumption, where women's moral worth is based on their willingness and ability to lift their families out of poverty.

keywords

gender; development; poverty; microfinance; financial inclusion; Philippines; neoliberalism

introduction

> Why women? why not men? The moment you give loans to the poor women, their first priority, when they have increase in income [is] food for the children, education for the children, shelter for the family ... The men, we are very, very sociable by nature. Our first priority is to show off ... 'hey guys, I have increased my income, let us drink together' ...
>
> (Dr Jaime Aristotle B. Alip, founder of CARD, a large microfinance institution in the Philippines, quoted in Rappler.com, 2013)

Despite tempered optimism, microcredit remains a popular poverty alleviation tool. The global microfinance industry is worth US$60–100 billion, with 200 million clients (World Bank, 2015). Muhammad Yunus, a Bangladeshi economist who founded the Grameen Bank, a renowned microcredit facility, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, which triggered a global 'microcredit revolution'. Unsurprisingly, microcredit programmes are a central feature of the development strategy employed by the Philippine government, its donor agencies and its creditors, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Microfinance refers to formal and informal financial services offered to the poor, with the common service being microcredit, or loans to start or sustain small enterprises, which are granted often without physical collateral (Brau and Woller, 2004). These enterprises are expected to be profitable and assumed to enable a 'virtuous upward spiral' of economic, social and political empowerment for borrowers (Mayoux, 1999). The minimalist approach espoused by the Grameen Bank involves the provision of credit, with little to no skills advancement or training. It relies on group guarantee measures such as peer monitoring, peer pressure and peer liability for late payments or defaults to secure loan repayments. This approach is used in many microcredit programmes across the world (Weber, 2004).

Microfinance institutions (MFIs) target women, with the dual objective of empowering them through access to credit and ensuring that aid is channelled efficiently because women are perceived as being more prudent and invested in the well-being of their families. This approach is inspired by Amartya Sen's (1999, p. 201) discussion of development as an expansion of women's freedom and agency, which is expected to occur when women contribute financially to the household and gain greater leverage in decision-making. Microcredit also provides states and international donors with a win-win solution of poverty alleviation at a profit (Morduch, 2000). Its narrative of inclusivity and empowerment celebrates the entrepreneurial potential of traditionally marginalised groups and their capacity to help themselves instead of relying on 'dole-outs'. Microcredit thus repositions development practice within a market-based framework.

While most of the literature on microcredit focuses on traditional economic indicators such as high loan repayment rates, high demand for loans and, occasionally, increases in income and spending on health and nutrition among borrowers, critics argue that the commercial turn in microfinance renders it unable to help the poorest demographics (Hulme, 2002; Sinclair, 2012). Feminist scholars (Chant, 2008; Keating *et al.*, 2010) question whether instrumentalist goals such as greater efficiency and lower risk for lending institutions can coexist with goals such as increasing women's freedoms and access to choice. Others worry that microcredit defuses resistance and political mobilisation against reduced social spending, because it facilitates consumption smoothing and cushions the impact of privatisation (Karim, 2001). Anne Marie Goetz and Rina Sen Gupta (1996) focus on the degree to which women borrowers control their loans. Juliet Hunt and Nalini Kasynathan (2002) argue that even if women have full control over the microenterprise, they earn very little for the labour-intensive traditional income generation activities into which they are pigeon-holed. Heloise Weber (2002) explains that Grameen Bank's 98 per cent loan repayment rate is deceptive and conceals huge social costs for women borrowers.

Few researchers have looked into the implications of Filipino women's engagement with microcredit for their agency and well-being. Lynne Milgram (2005) argues that microcredit programmes in Laguna and the Cordillera region in the Philippines targeted achieving financial stability within a short time rather than social change objectives such as building collective agency. Women with existing businesses were prioritised over the poorest of the poor. Milgram also observes that women's traditional income-earning activities, such as collecting coconuts, street vending or gardening, had little room for growth in a saturated local market and were sensitive to economic shocks. In these cases, women were saddled with loan repayment obligations without deriving much benefit. The peer group model, she argues, was used merely as an instrument for efficiency in loan delivery and recovery without any attempts at collective empowerment or critique of existing inequalities. If at all, it undermined women's solidarity when some women were unable to pay. Laura Tsai (2017), in her quantitative study of women and families in Cebu, suggests a causal link between women's independent management of day-to-day household resources and their risk of experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV). She cautions against assuming that women's control over household financial management, especially in low-income families, is necessarily empowering and a shield against IPV. In these situations, women were expected to make insufficient income cover the family's needs and male partners may choose to withhold or hide part of their income for personal expenses such as alcohol. This can lead to disagreements that precipitate IPV. Her work proves the need for explicit attention to gendered power dynamics regarding the control of household financial resources.

This research contributes to the academic conversation on microcredit by foregrounding Filipino women's stories about its effects on their relationships in the private sphere. The development community has a generalised understanding of the risks and potentials of microfinance, and it is essential to explore how women's personal situations intersect with, and potentially challenge or uphold, these general assumptions. By comparing borrowers' self-narratives, which reveal their motivations for seeking loans, the daily struggles they face and their assessment of its impact on their lives, with the prescribed objectives of microcredit agencies that target women, we can reflect more carefully about how the microfinance industry can be improved, or rethink its dominance in development discourse altogether. Broadly, this article shows that the expectation that women should take on entrepreneurial roles to lift their families out of poverty reifies a family structure that relies on women bearing disproportionate burdens. As all of the women interviewed are mothers, their stories are grounded illustrations of how microcredit is reshaping relationships between women and their families, women and poverty and women and the state in entrenching these burdens.

The next sections include a description of the Philippine microcredit environment, a discussion of the research methodology and a synthesis of the key themes that emerged from the interviews and their theoretical significance.

the Philippine microcredit environment

The Philippines declared microfinance its flagship poverty alleviation programme in 2000 and takes pride in being a global microfinance pioneer (Jiao, 2012). In 2018, microfinance loans issued by banks, cooperatives and non-government organisations added up to over US$3.5 billion among 5.7 million borrowers.[1] Ninety per cent of borrowers are women, two-thirds of whom are based in rural areas (MCPI, 2016). As of 2005, most management positions in MFIs were occupied by men, with women limited to loan collection roles, and women from target populations were not consulted on programme design and implementation (Pineda-Ofreneo, 2005).

The Philippine government, influenced by the ADB, is building a private microfinance market, ceding control over market dynamics such as products and pricing to private entities. In 2001, the central bank issued a circular stipulating that interest on microcredit shall be reasonable but not lower than prevailing market rates, which is an overt disavowal of subsidised lending (Charitonenko, 2003, pp. 34–35). The commercialisation of cooperatives and microfinance NGOs, particularly large and medium-sized ones, is promoted by donors and the government through technical assistance and funding support (*ibid.*, pp. 16–20). Commercial banks are entering the microfinance market because the poor have proven to be reliable borrowers, as seen in high-profit margins in the microfinance industry due to high interest rates and high repayment rates (Nkechi, 2010).

Philippine MFIs mostly employ the Grameen Bank approach (usually five women per group). Other models used by organisations such as ASA Philippines (ASA) and Alliance of Philippine Partners in Enterprise Development (APPEND) are still group-lending based but may require each member to be responsible for his or her loan (ASA) or a variant thereof, such as the Scale-Up Branch Model based on the Trust Bank Model, which involves groups of ten to thirty women managed by elected leaders in the group and required to undergo business training (APPEND and KMBI) (Nkechi, 2010).

Dr Jaime Aristotle B. Alip, founder and chairperson of the Center for Agriculture and Rural Development (CARD), a 'miracle' microcredit organisation in the Philippines and a leader in Asia, described women as better credit risks because they were responsive to peer pressure and feared embarrassment.[2] He attributed part of CARD's success to their ability to 'maximise women's traits' (*ibid.*). He endorsed the minimalist approach, which relies on women's survival skills, which he said were evident in rural areas where poor women took on responsibilities in their families, such as cooking and selling, even at a young age.

methodology

This project is a response to development interventions that emphasise financial and commercial viability for donors and lending institutions while simultaneously purporting to rescue women and their families from poverty. Microfinance programmes in the Philippines have been evaluated using

[1] The World Bank, 'DataBank: MIX Market', https://databank.worldbank.org/source/mix-market [last accessed 26 August 2021].
[2] Partnership for Development Assistance in the Philippines Inc. (PDAP), 'Center for Agriculture and Rural Development: banking on a people's bank', http://www. pdap.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=140&Itemid=134 [last accessed 10 October 2018].

predominantly financial and economic indicators and, less frequently, in terms of the technical assistance offered to borrowers and financial returns on investment for borrowers.[3] These indicators are taken as proxies for the empowerment of female borrowers, an approach that is limited, if not problematic. Even if microcredit programmes may reduce poverty on an intergenerational level, the personal costs for women, who are the primary conduits, need to be interrogated. The richness and complexity of this information is unlikely to be completely captured by numerical financial data. This research, therefore, draws on women's stories as a source of insight about the effect of microfinance interventions on their lives. These stories do not represent the condition of all women engaged in microcredit, but they may be indicative of some common experiences and challenges.

The primary data collection method for this research was semi-structured interviews conducted in 2011 and 2012 with twenty women borrowers in Zamboanga City, which is the third largest city in the Philippines and sixth most populous, with most of the population residing in urban areas. In 2015, Zamboanga's population exceeded 860,000, with an average of five members per household. A majority identify as Christians and there is a significant Muslim minority. The city primarily depends on agriculture and fishing and also a booming service industry and forestry sector (Elvinia, 2005). A huge 99.7 per cent of total registered establishments are small enterprises.

My interviewees' ages ranged from 25 to 54. Their formal education levels varied. They had all been married. Two were widows whose husbands had died from illness, four were separated from their husbands and kept their children and fourteen lived with their husbands and children. They all had children and half of them had more than the national average of three children per family.[4] They were all self-identified heterosexual and Roman Catholic. None earned more than US$3 a day, after accounting for their debts. None of their husbands earned more than US$3 a day either. Some received limited financial support from relatives overseas or their parents or siblings. A snowball sampling method was used, where I relied on two personal contacts who were members of cooperatives to refer other interview participants.

The women borrowed from a variety of cooperatives (such as the People's MicroFinance Cooperative and the Micro Entrepreneurs Multi-Purpose Cooperative), credit unions, rural banks, rotating savings and credit associations, foundations (ASA, etc.) and commercial banks. They explained that it was common practice to borrow from various sources, sometimes simultaneously. Prior to borrowing from MFIs, none of them were engaged in entrepreneurship. In fact, some MFIs such as CARD take pride in transforming 'simple housemakers' into entrepreneurs (CARD MRI, 2014).

The interviews were conducted in a mix of Tagalog, Chavacano, Bisaya and English, which are languages I speak. They were held in venues chosen by the women, such as fast-food joints or cafes. Most preferred to be interviewed in groups of four or five. There were four group interviews, with each set taking over five hours, and two individual interviews of between two and three hours each. I began with questions about where they lived, their family arrangements and dependents and their relationship situations. I then asked about their motivations for engaging in microcredit borrowing, the process by which they secured approval for loans, how they spent the loans, the loan repayment process, the role of their partners in

[3] See the UN Advisors Group on Inclusive Financial Sectors Private Sector Working Group's (2008) assessment, Asian Development Bank's *Philippines: Microfinance Development Program Performance Evaluation Document* (2012) and the Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department policy brief *Strengthening the Microfinance Sector Towards Inclusive Growth* (2013).

[4] Lower-income groups tend to have higher birth rates and suffer most from the ban on abortions, lack of access to contraception and the association of masculinity and virility with siring children (Chant, 1996).

spending the loans, the effect of microcredit on their work hours and family life, as well as other related issues. During the interviews, the women also asked each other questions and exchanged advice.

In the next sections, I discuss key findings from the interviews and their broader theoretical implications. The lending companies and cooperatives are mostly kept anonymous in deference to my interviewees' preferences. All potentially identifying personal information has been removed.

control over loans

Unlike many women in Bangladesh and India (Karim, 2001; Weber, 2004), whose male partners had reappropriated their loans but refused to share responsibility for loan repayment, my interviewees had control over their loans, and those who did use the loans for microenterprises exercised significant, if not complete, control over managing them. Most of my interviewees also determined how to manage household expenses without much resistance from their husbands. Roughly half of them said that their husbands made a significant contribution to household expenses. In these cases, the husbands turned over their wages and left it up to their wives to decide how to manage the household budget. This is consistent with observations made by Jeanne Illo (2002, p. 9) and Sylvie Chant (1996) about women being primary decision-makers as regards the household budget.[5] All but one of the women in this research were free to conduct their business publicly. Unlike in Bangladesh (Banks, 2013), the reality of poor women working outside the home or managing small enterprises and even working overseas to supplement the family income is widely accepted in the Philippines (Chant, 1996).

The prominent themes from my interviewees were their conceptions of good motherhood, which they defined as the ability to financially provide for their children; the debt trap and higher work burdens they all experienced; and the effects of borrowing on their relationships with their husbands. Those who reported having to shoulder most, if not all, of the household expenses while living with their husbands described their husbands as 'lazy', and four of those six women had separated from their husbands. Those separated reported being in an even better position to control the amount of loans they took in and their household budget. Three women were beaten by their husbands when there was not enough money for expenses or when they asked their husband to work; of these three, one was separated.

good mothers as economic providers and successful entrepreneurs

My interviewees talked extensively about their children and their role as mothers. More than half the value of everyone's loans regularly went to consumption, with a third of them saying they barely had any money left afterwards. At least ten of them managed to spend part of their loans on small enterprises such as food stalls, buying and reselling clothes, purchasing hairdressing equipment and maintaining small convenience stores and bakeries. Common consumption expenses were their children's school fees, food and utility bills and expenses incurred when family members fell ill. For six of them, borrowing was key to survival, as it was their only way to feed their children and send them to school. In other cases, loans helped finance their children's education in private schools. One said, 'I know I'm in debt, but I refuse to scrimp on my son!'. All said that they were willing to work long hours if it meant a better future for their children. As Elena said, 'As long as they don't end up like me'. Many talked about investing in better furniture and appliances for their homes and buying presents for their children on

[5] While poor women are usually left to manage the household budget in the Philippines, limited finances afford them no discretionary power and in fact result in greater psychological stress to make ends meet (Chant, 1996).

special occasions. Except for Ana and Cristina, who were separated from their husbands and occasionally went on casual dates and socialised with friends, everyone reported spending their loans or profits from small businesses exclusively on family expenses. Everyone felt it was both their duty and a source of pride and fulfilment to be able to provide for their children materially. Similarly, Maila Stivens (1998, p. 63) observes the changing conceptions of a good mother in Malaysia and Singapore from a kind, nurturing and caring homemaker to one who possesses the energy to fulfil multiple roles, including 'to be an active consumer under great pressure to acquire all the commodities necessary for the satisfactory performance of motherhood'. To be able to participate in this consumption, however, women need to engage in paid work or some form of enterprise.

The value these women attach to motherhood is in no way inferiorising. This role is deeply meaningful for them and its fulfilment is a source of happiness. Their investment in their children seems to stem from a desire both to ensure that their children lead better lives and to be seen as successful mothers. What is worth deconstructing is the normative prescription of good motherhood, cultivated and harnessed by the microcredit industry, which circumscribes women's decisions. For example, when comparing themselves to their husbands, only a minority of the women took credit for the domestic work they disproportionately undertook. Often, they focused on income-related contributions and derived more affirmation from those. My interviewees' lack of pride in doing housework may be attributed to the higher status accorded by society in general to paid work.

It is helpful to view their lived realities against the backdrop of global transformations, particularly the dominance of the neoliberal ideology that drives many of today's political, social and economic processes, including the microcredit revolution. Much has been written about the neoliberal emphasis on self-governance and self-help and the rational economic subjects it produces. Wendy Brown (2003) explains that an 'economic rationality' is the distinguishing factor of this ideology. Morality is reduced to economic rationality, and therefore individuals are constructed as economic agents whose worth is measured by their capacity for self-care, which she defines as 'the ability to provide for their own needs and their own ambitions' (*ibid.*, para. 15). This reconstitutes our notions of individual freedom and responsibility by making individuals fully responsible for the consequences of their actions and their life outcomes, regardless of the constraints they face, including a lack of education or employable skills, or their housework and child-rearing obligations. Obscuring structural causes of poverty and framing poverty as the individual's responsibility defuses collective resistance to prevailing social and economic powers. (Paid) work is the key to achieving prosperity and a pre-requisite to being a good citizen. Indeed, many of the women in this research described their engagement with microcredit as their 'duty as good mothers'. One of them said, 'What will people say about me, if my child does not have a new uniform at the start of the school term?'.

This thinking provides moral cover for reduced social spending because it constructs the poor no longer as citizens with rights and entitlements, but as 'clients' with responsibilities to themselves and to their families. The Philippines has aggressively privatised education and healthcare at the behest of the ADB, and my interviewees lamented the rising costs of education, healthcare and water and electricity services. The collapse of the biggest market players in pre-need education insurance left several of them without savings for their children's education.

Chant (1996), Illo (2002, p. 8) and Violeta Perez-Corral (2002, pp. 196–197) show that since state services were scaled back in the Philippines, women have been expected to be more flexible with their time and to manage the household but also earn an income. Cutbacks in healthcare led to a greater burden on women to care for the sick, and price inflations required women to devote more time and effort to finding/growing food, saving on water and electricity and paying for increasing school expenses, all of which are expected of women as 'free services'. Women in the late 1990s and early 2000s worked longer hours than in previous years, while men retained their entitlement to rest and leisure (including money for alcohol, cigarettes and gambling) and to a larger share of food and nutrition, with women expected to prioritise their children (Illo, 2002, p. 10). In effect, the mobilisation of civil society and individuals as 'partners' of the state in promoting social welfare has the effect of turning poor women into 'the safety net for irresponsible macro-economic policies' (Molyneux, 2002, p. 179).

My interviews illustrate how the microcredit industry has catapulted consumption and financial provision as a new modality of demonstrating virtue as a mother, above the usual reproductive and household obligations. The message to women and their communities is that a non-entrepreneurial mother is an unsuccessful mother. In the words of an interviewee: 'We have talents, we should make use of them by working'. While the assumption that women always prioritise their families is derived from traditional notions of women's altruism and capacity for self-sacrifice (Chant, 2008), microcredit has provided a new vehicle for these obligations to be imposed on women.

It has been suggested by advocates of microcredit that women's self-esteem rises when they see the tangible effects of their work, which provides them with the confidence to challenge gender norms within the household (Cohen, 1997). Indeed, a minority of my interviewees have either left their husbands who were lazy and philandering or pushed them to look for work. However, it seems that the process by which any form of empowerment happens is less straightforward than women simply becoming conscious of their rights and directly challenging oppressive structures, individually or collectively. It is true that the women interviewed displayed a consciousness of the value of their efforts, but they seemed less concerned with their individual rights or even with having to work longer hours than men.

Holly Worthen (2012), too, reads women's agency differently from Cohen and the major donors. She describes the women in her study as committed to and preoccupied with being good wives and mothers, especially in the face of economic scarcity. They were intellectually aware of their rights and expressed a desire to exercise them in the same way men did, but accepted that they could not always practise their rights because they wanted to fulfil their culturally prescribed roles. In Worthen's (*ibid.*) interviews, a prominent theme that emerged was not the specific actions women took to change their gender roles, but instead their best attempts to fulfil these roles. These roles are like those identified and accepted by the women interviewed in my research and consist primarily of ensuring that their families are fed, clothed and kept healthy, and the children sent to school. As was the case in Worthen's study, microcredit was not intended by my interviewees as a way to increase their bargaining power with their husbands, to change the household division of labour or to challenge conceptions of good motherhood in favour of more individualistic conceptions of freedom. Instead, microcredit participation was incorporated into and informed by gendered norms. Monica best articulated how most of my interviewees conceived of freedom, happiness and empowerment: 'Even if I sometimes want to, I cannot pursue my other dreams and hobbies or go on a holiday. I cannot rest. I cannot tell my husband and in-laws to leave me alone. I cannot, because I cannot be happy, I cannot be free, until I see my children healthy and happy'.

It would be inaccurate to write off these women's efforts as completely lacking in agency and a product of 'false consciousness' or as not resulting in any form of empowerment or transformation in their relationships with their partners and families. However, it is important to make visible some possible hidden trade-offs. Often, microcredit clients actually need assistance in paying for school fees, household expenses and medical emergencies but pretend they want microenterprise loans because other services are not available (Hulme, 2002). We thus need to be attentive to the ways in which microfinance discourse serves a disciplinary function of narrowing what individuals feel they can claim from the state and dampening resistance to privatisation and austerity, which may also have a disproportionate impact on women.

the debt trap and new 'unfreedoms'

The dominant thinking in development economics is that access to credit and greater economic engagement enables women's freedom. Amartya Sen (1999, p. 193) argues that it is inherent in family living to negotiate the interests of family members such as the division of food, healthcare and other provisions, and that 'the perception of who is doing how much "productive" work … can be very influential' in determining the extent of women's voice in the decision-making process and the division of entitlements. 'Men's relative dominance connects with a number of factors, including the position of being the "breadwinner" whose economic power commands respect even within the family', and '[w]hile women work long hours every day at home, since this work does not produce a remuneration, it is often ignored in the accounting of the respective contributions of women and men in the family's joint prosperity' (*ibid.*, pp. 193–194). Therefore, 'working outside the home and earning an independent income tend to have a clear impact on enhancing the social standing of a woman in the household and the society' (*ibid.*, p. 191).

The effects of access to credit on my interviewees' mental and physical well-being and their relationships with their partners provide a more complex picture. They bore unsuccessful enterprises or low profits as a personal failure in an arrangement that was doomed from the beginning because they had to divert loans to family expenses, lacked the time and training to run small businesses or were encouraged by MFIs to pursue a business idea that was not viable. Lydia's experience is instructive: 'I set up a corner in my home for a small-time hairdressing business, but in two months, there were five of us doing the same thing. But there weren't that many people who needed haircuts in our village!'.

They experienced panic and anxiety as payment deadlines loomed because they expected harassment from creditors or other group members. Many had their furniture confiscated over late payments. All of them constantly feared their ventures failing or being trapped in debt, because they would be blamed by their husbands and subjected to greater psychological stress. One said that whenever loans had to be repaid, her husband would say, 'that's your problem!'. When she was unable to pay school fees for their children or give him money, he called her useless for working but not having money. More than two-thirds of the women took on two or three jobs to pay off loans, including handwashing clothes for neighbours, buying and reselling groceries, cleaning other people's houses and cooking and selling food. A few of their children committed to helping shoulder payments upon graduating from university and finding jobs, but loans were generally considered to be solely the women's responsibility. All of them reported an increase in their working hours when they started borrowing money. Two had husbands and children who performed household chores such as cooking and cleaning. Several women primarily did most of the housework, with a little help from their children. One-third did everything by themselves. Most did not have time for recreation or even to worship or be by themselves. In Jasmine's words, 'You have household chores, you care for young children, you sell things to pay back loans, and you commute to the market and back. Where is my time?'. Jasmine described the process of having to pay interest on her loans and that same money being lent back to her as '*ginigisa sa sariling mantika*', or being cooked in your own fat. Some received a 'final demand letter' from lending institutions. They worried about going to jail but reflected that there was nothing they could do. If they did not work or borrow money, they would have nothing to eat. Monica described borrowing as '*kapit sa patalim*', or hanging onto a dagger, a metaphor for engaging in desperate means to survive. She continued, 'They prefer lending to women because we are responsible and have no vice. We are easier to scare into paying back, while men fight back or banish collectors. Women are usually home while men are harder to find'.

Most of them resented the strain on friendships under group liability schemes. Anabel said, 'I was punished for being a reliable borrower. I was forced to stay in the cooperative's centre until everyone completed their daily payment'. Conversely, Judy, whose clothing business failed because customers did not pay for items they purchased on deferred payment schemes, shared, 'My own friends asked the cooperative to not reissue me loans. We had vicious fights. They're lucky to have back-up options ... their husbands are still alive'. Cristina recalled her mandatory savings of US$1,000 being confiscated by her cooperative because two members in her group defaulted and ran away. 'It got bad. Even the development officers of the cooperative encouraged struggling members to just take loans from other people or loan sharks at higher interest rates so they can pay up and everyone can go home', she added. Julia, who had to use loans entirely for family expenses, said: 'I knew I had to find other jobs like washing and cleaning for other people, even if my body ached and once I actually collapsed, because defaulting meant putting financial pressure on my friends. *Nakakahiya*'.[6] Others were worried about disclosing assistance from family members overseas because they felt it would create an expectation for them to 'bail their friends out' should the latter struggle with repayments. Everyone was wary of entering into the same type of enterprise as their friends for fear of being seen as competitors. In this vein, Lamia Karim (2001) and Milgram (2005) argue that microcredit introduces competition, self-interest and individualism into women's already limited network of social relationships.

All but one were unable to repay their loans and needed to keep finding money to be able pay off previous loans. First, at least a quarter of them were in debt to individuals or loan sharks prior to engaging in microcredit. They approached loan sharks first because loan sharks had absolutely no prerequisite requirements prior to loaning, while microcredit institutions required residence certificates, tax certificates and similar documents. When they were hard-pressed to pay back these loans, they turned to microcredit, but continued to struggle anyway. Second, the rest of the women

[6] Shame or loss of face.

reported a progression from having to take out low-interest to high-interest loans. Linda Mayoux (1999) and Milgram (2001) describe this phenomenon of cross-borrowing as a debt cycle in which borrowers, especially women, are trapped, after borrowing to meet their family's consumption needs. This happens because of the shame and pressure associated with not paying one's share in a group lending scheme or the need to be reissued more (and sometimes higher) loans, which is contingent on paying back previous loans.

At least seven women noted the increased dependence, laziness and resentment of their husbands. Two widows and four others shouldered most of their household expenses. One common theme was husbands whose gambling and alcohol consumption intensified as women began borrowing. Some husbands turned over less of their pay to their wives. In these cases, their husbands were not controlling how women's loans were used, but women found themselves increasingly responsible for the family expenses. Diana was teased about spoiling her attractive husband because he did not work, spent her earnings on alcohol and expected her to do all the housework: 'It's like he is just one of your children!'. In our interview, Diana acknowledged for the first time to her friends that he beat her and threw plates and other objects at her when she did not have enough money.

Most of my interviewees declared with a mixture of resignation and pride that men were only willing to work in jobs with official designations as opposed to women who were more adaptive and willing to sacrifice. As Flor stated:

> We will do anything because women cannot bear to look at their children suffering unlike men. I wash clothes of two or three families in the morning and clean houses in the afternoon. I even accept US$2 to clean a big two-story house. We are happy when we can feed our families, while our husbands have their own dreams and like spending time with their friends.

This affirms Illo's (2002, p. 9) findings that women are willing to accept more inferior work contracts and lower pay than men. Some of the women in this situation admitted to nagging their husbands to find work, but stressed that they did so in private.

Some of the women also wondered about the effect of their earnings on their husbands' masculinity. Ana shared, 'When I started earning enough for our family, he stayed home. I encouraged him to look for work'. His friends mocked him for being stuck at home. He eventually cheated on her: 'We were not fighting. I never expected it. The other woman was not even attractive! But maybe she made him feel like a man'. This validates the observation that housework is generally perceived as the woman's domain in the Philippines, with male participation limited to more masculine roles like household repairs, and that men who take on a greater share than is thought culturally acceptable risk emasculation, especially if their wives earn more than them (Chant, 1996; Illo, 1997). Cristina suggested that her husband's discomfort with her late nights with friends or visiting relatives might have been one reason for their separation. The perceived economic agency of some women, even those who spent exclusively on their families, may have been experienced as threatening by their partners. Conceptions of masculinity are usually tied to financial autonomy and economic superiority over women, and when this is challenged, some men can assert themselves in more aggressive and threatening ways (Elmhirst, 2007).

responsibilisation: a duty to work packaged as freedom to work

The idea of finding dignity in work is a powerful moral basis for ensuring that every citizen has the right and the freedom to work. This message is especially seductive when applied to women, who have been historically excluded from the formal labour market and kept from accessing financial services by barriers such as collateral requirements, salaried guarantor requirements, documentation requirements and limited mobility and literacy (Cheston and Kuhn, 2002). For my interviewees, however, there seemed to be a thin line between microcredit as 'opportunity' and 'obligation'. All felt the need to apply for loans because it was an available economic opportunity their husbands did not have. Beth shared, 'My in-laws kept bringing up these loans. Every other day, they asked me if I would apply. How could I say no?'. Marilyn shared, 'I was ashamed to say I wanted to stop my food business because I was so tired. Just thinking about it made me feel guilty. All my friends were working like horses, and here I was, being selfish and irresponsible'.

Women's ability to live up to the expectations of good motherhood may provide them with confidence and pride, if not leverage to renegotiate their position in their relationships. However, the popularity of microcredit 'opportunities' may lock women into subject positions of 'good mothers' and 'good wives' because community judging practices and women's own value systems ascribe respectability to mothers who seize available mechanisms that allow them to contribute to the family income, even if this happens to be labour-intensive, low-wage work. Those who do not 'work' are seen as irresponsible. Hence, the microcredit system becomes a regulatory mechanism unto itself. The minimal income from this work was meant to create more freedom for them, but ultimately, what is the nature of the freedom being created and the contexts in which this freedom could be exercised? It seemed that they were afforded the freedom to rearrange their debts and a freedom that could be exercised in the form of limited economic engagement, and largely through the lens of motherhood.

Further, the increasing demand for loans, which is touted by the microfinance industry as a sign of success, might be a poor proxy for women's empowerment. Increased demand for loans could very well be a self-fulfiling cycle that reveals less about the success of microcredit programmes in improving women's lives and more about the pressure felt by women to meet household expenses through the means most available to them. It was clear that for most of my interviewees, borrowing from MFIs was a household survival strategy rather than an expansion of personal freedom. Therefore, it is likely that microcredit programmes are merely incorporated within traditional structures of women's obligations to their family.

conclusion and recommendations

Conversations about microcredit in the Philippines continue to revolve around indicators that quantify credit constraints on women (Malapit, 2012), the effect of borrowing on family income (Agbola, Acupan and Mahmood, 2017) and loan repayment rates for group and individual liability schemes (Giné and Karlan, 2014). These metrics function as discursive manoeuvres that allow development specialists to render political decisions as 'technical solutions to [technical] problems' (Ferguson, 1994, p. 88), thereby depoliticising them and obscuring the power asymmetries and human costs involved. There is a striking disparity between my interviewees' conceptions of their needs and how development experts have framed microcredit for two decades as the main strategy for improving poor women's lives. I ended my interviews by asking my interviewees to identify what their priorities would be if they had the power to decide social policies. They listed cash transfers, food subsidies, cheaper water and electricity, subsidised housing, cheaper public transport and shorter waiting times in public hospitals. They also wanted safe and decent regular work for themselves and their partners. Not one mentioned microcredit. This disparity reveals the epistemic injustice in conversations about development policies, which often exclude poor women and regard them as objects of intervention whose behaviours need correction, as though the inability to succeed as an entrepreneur is a personal failure.

There is, however, room for a discursive shift. Bonn Juego (2020) observes that the COVID-19 pandemic provides a new context for reimagining economic paradigms in the Philippines in a way that prioritises social support schemes and the creation of decent work opportunities. Many social support programmes were introduced in the previous Aquino administration from 2010 to 2016 and also seem to be a core thrust of the current Duterte administration, although there are legitimate concerns about how these programmes are designed (Ramos, 2020). The pandemic has brought to light the insecurity of small and medium businesses, the disproportionate burdens of care borne by women and the importance of unconditionally addressing basic human needs. My research demonstrates the need for further scholarship on microcredit and poverty alleviation to account for the gendered dimension of economic paradigms and interventions beyond merely 'counting women'. For example, the global push for trade liberalisation, which was celebrated for creating jobs for poor women in the Philippines, is now increasingly recognised as having led to work that was irregular, unstable, unsafe and exploitative (Pineda-Ofreneo, 2002, p. 59).

My interviewees' reflections on their work also reveal that agency is a slippery concept that needs more rigorous attention. Their engagement with microcredit was driven by a combination of choice and coercion. Their control over how they used loans was severely limited by external constraints such as reduced social spending and market saturation for certain enterprises. They are also subjects that are socially and discursively constituted by norms around good motherhood. Development programmes need to be accountable and avoid entrenching a non-egalitarian model of work burdens in the family. This goes beyond narrow improvements such as providing women borrowers more 'entrepreneurial skills and training' or enforcing mandatory savings. It requires viewing women as rights-bearers who can demand social justice. The hierarchical relationships between microcredit programme managers and borrowers enable disciplinary practices such as punishing 'problematic' borrowers and turning women against each other, and must be interrogated. Poverty alleviation approaches need to be grounded in radical and transformative goals such as building women's ability to collectivise and engage in consciousness-raising and critique of their own social relationships and of the interventions to which they are subjected. Otherwise, these programmes may deliver exploitation rebranded as women's empowerment.

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author biography

Sharmila Parmanand is an ESRC postdoctoral research fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) Department of Gender Studies.

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