

The Impact of Cultural, Religious and Legal Factors on Women's Empowerment through Conditional Cash Transfers



Introduction

This brief draws from a research report titled “*Assessment of Women’s Empowerment in the Productive Social Safety Net Program in Tanzania*”. The research was funded by the International Development Centre (IDRC) as part of a research programme on “Growth and Opportunities for Women” and supported by the Tanzania Social Action Fund (TASAF). It is based on the analysis of culture, religious and legal factors that affect the empowerment of women through Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs). Its main thrust is that for women’s empowerment and disempowerment to be clearly understood, there is a need for a deeper analysis

of factors that enable and constrain women’s capabilities to assert themselves as they struggle to fit into the gendered spaces and ladders of power in their households and communities. CCTs are aimed at enabling the poorest of the poor to meet their basic needs while they find ways to get out of poverty. Poverty in Tanzania is more prevalent in rural areas and among women. Evidence from this study indicates that although both women and men experience poverty, women tend to suffer more from poverty because of prevailing cultural and religious beliefs and practices, legal systems and household leadership structures. These combine with other institutional and systemic factors to adversely affect poverty and prosperity among women.

Methodology

The data which informed this research was collected in several villages in the Shinyanga, Coast and Dodoma Regions from piloted districts for the TASAF's Productive Social Safety Net (PSSN) Phase 1 Program where all the respondents were the beneficiaries of CCTs. The data sets provide insights into the impact of cultural, legal and religious factors on women's empowerment. Among other tools the study used the Women Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) approach focusing on how cultural factors impact on women's decision making in and control over production, productive resources, income, leadership and time. Ethnographical research techniques were used to take stock of the cultural issues that impact on women.

Theoretical Framework

Women's' empowerment is conceptualized as the creation of conditions for women to acquire capacity and capabilities to assert themselves on the spaces and ladders of power at household and community levels. The theoretical assumptions are that culture, religion and legal institutions have the potential to create conditions for the enablement or disablement of women in their efforts to become equal partners with men in processes of power, production, governance and distribution at the household, community and society levels. However, patriarchy as a system that defines and institutionalizes ladders and spaces of power in favour of boys and men to the disadvantage of girls and women uses biological characteristics to demarcate the spaces occupied by women confining them to lower levels of power while allocating men wider space in the household and the public domain. This demarcation of spaces and positions of power determines the share women get and their control over decisions regarding distribution of acquired resources at the household level including CCTs. Informal systems of education, religious doctrines and practices, oral and print literature and official and private media reinforce gender stereotypes and systems of gender exclusion and make some of the victims especially in rural and other disadvantaged communities to accept them as normal.

Findings about CCTs and Cultural Factors ***Culture and women empowerment in general***

The summary of findings on the impact of culture on women within the WEIA and other gender empowerment frameworks in the contexts of CCTs covers four main sub-themes: culture in general, legal systems, religious beliefs and practices and household structures (monogamous, polygamous and female headed households).

Generally, it was found that cultural practices are gradually changing positively, albeit slowly, with a reasonable number of women becoming able to acquire productive assets and increasing their influence in domestic and household affairs especially on CCT funds which are normally transferred to women. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that there are still cultural and social institutions such as gendered behavioural patterns, clan-taboos, family rituals, initiation ceremonies, etiquettes and norms which position women in a subordinate class in many studied communities. The commoditization of marital relations, for example, through bride price and the institution of arranged marriages legitimize the relegation of women to the bottom of the ladders of power.

Legal systems and women empowerment

In the area of legal systems, the co-existence of statutory and customary law leaves matters such as land ownership, access to productive resources, inheritance, marriage and divorce in the realm of customary law in most rural areas especially in all villages studied. These laws do not recognize some of the basic women's human rights such as consensual marriage and sex, reproductive health and rights, family planning and unwanted pregnancies etc. There is a strong intersection between customary law and indigenous belief systems which together with taboos, norms and family rituals make it harder for communities to accept change and adopt gender equality based in public policies and statutory laws. The main finding is that generally customary practices in the surveyed communities do not support women's empowerment through equal participation in decisions on and control over production, productive resources, income, leadership and use of women's time.

Religion and women empowerment

On religion findings show that religious doctrines and beliefs play an important role in either empowering or disempowering believers, women in particular. The respondents in the study were either Christians or Muslims but also believe in indigenous systems or traditional religions and the majority believe that religion teaches them good things which they apply in practice. However, it is clear that religious beliefs and practices in both major religions support and sustain the patriarchal system with its inherent systemic and institutional inequities and inequality. In both women are taught to be almost blindly obedient to their husbands.

In Christianity dissolving a marriage is almost impossible even where it has failed completely. In Islam if a man can afford it, he is allowed to marry up to four wives and divorce is dependent on the man's decision. In some religions, women and girls are discriminated when it comes to inheritance and sharing of property in case of divorce or separation. Some of the discriminatory practices are reinforced by traditional belief systems which are inculcated through indigenous knowledge embedded in folklore, rituals, taboos, totems and community art. These practices lead in many cases to the disempowerment of many women.



Household structures and women's empowerment

Household leadership structures were also found to impact on women's capacity and capability to influence decisions on production, productive resources, income, leadership and time in relation to CCTs. Polygamous families were found to have as many as seven to ten members. Within the TASAF programme it was noticed that in targeted household, only one family member (one wife) is included as a beneficiary of the cash transfers and each of the wives of polygamous households' lives in a separate house or homestead. Husbands have full control of resources in each homestead and some women reported that when they get the cash transferred to them, they hand it over to their husbands who distribute it among all homesteads including those not targeted. In some cases, the husbands only claim part of the money in order to give to the other wives.

In monogamous households the situation is not different because the patriarchal system that characterises the polygamous households is also prevalent in monogamous households. As in the case of women in polygamous households most female respondents in monogamous households were subordinated when it comes to decisions related to production, productive resources, income, leadership and use of their time. In most households the money transferred through the CCTs was surrendered to the

husbands who distributed it across the household and use surplus on expenditure of their own choice including extramarital partners.

In households where a male partner is permanently absent due to death, migration of spouse, disability, divorce, choice to remain single (officially unmarried), separation and widowhood, females were heading the households. Unlike in polygamous and monogamous households, women in female-headed households have more power to make their own independent decisions especially at household level. However, despite this, some of the female heads of households (FHHs) were still affected by patriarchal traditions and practices related to inheritance, widowhood, child maintenance.

Conclusions

Cash transfers are important and crucial in improving the economic and social condition of women, but they are not enough on their own to change their position in society. Change of their position requires a transformation of systems of power that creates conditions for equal citizenship, partnership and equal participation by men and women in decisions related to production and resources distribution. Such conditions can only be created if negative cultural, legal, religious and indigenous belief systems are changed to respond and conform to national policies and international regional and national legal and other instruments on gender equality and equitable distribution of resources at household, community and national levels.

Policy Recommendations

It is recommended to TASAF, the Government and Development Partners to:

Extend and upscale the cash transfer programme because it is positively contributing to poverty reduction, particularly in the rural areas where poverty is prevalent.

Undertake more in-depth studies on the impact of culture and religious beliefs on social protection interventions in general and TASAF mechanisms in order to inform the design of additional interventions targeting cultural barriers to women empowerment.

Intensify policy dialogue on widening space to increased participation and control for women in decisions related to production, productive resources, income, leadership and use of women's time in the contexts of social protection interventions.



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