

Uneven Empowerment: A Case Study on Women Beekeepers in Central Iran

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Abstract: *The Association of Women Beekeepers included 53 rural women and was formed in 2000 based on a developmental intervention named Land and Water project. They received an interest and collateral free loan plus a grant from an international program named Small Grants Program (SGP) to implement an environmental project. These women worked for 10 years and then decided to split up into five smaller groups. In the early years they showed some very important features of empowered women who could work together easily and successfully. After splitting up, near the end of 2010, they did little collective action. The question is while they seemed so successful why were they not empowered enough to continue their interaction with the society. Were they empowered personally and not collectively? For answering these questions a mixed method was designed. The observation showed that the process of personal empowerment was more successful than the collective one. Based on the theoretical approaches the women's empowerment process, especially based on the microcredit schema, usually keeps women in the informal sector which means they cannot connect with social and economic infra-structure.*

Keywords: *Personal Empowerment Collective Empowerment Rural Women Women's empowerment*

Introduction

In the year 2002, I was invited to be a member of the team that was reviewing the Small Grants program (SGP¹) in Iran. Reviewing different SGP projects, I met members of an Association named "Women Beekeepers of Rameh²". They had started their activities about 2 years before I met them. I observed them for a couple of 3 month periods and reviewed available documents about their activities. It seemed that they had accomplished their tasks successfully. I started to become interested in them. This positive evaluation did not just come from me but also the other consultants and facilitators. I was interested in their community because:

1. They made and saved some money.
2. The Association was in a position to give small loans, about \$100-\$150, to some members.
3. The women could repay their loan.
4. Women accepted responsibilities.
5. Women seemed self-confident. Nobody was in the center of the power in the group, even their representatives.
6. There was group camaraderie among women.
7. They seemed to have clear ideas about future.

These features are very important characteristics which showed a group of empowered women. The Women Beekeepers could work and interact together peacefully and successfully. The Association was sustained and they could continue their activities for years. To find out more about them and the way they made such a successful cooperation, I involved myself in their activities for the next seven years.

The women managed to keep the Association for about 10 years. They also worked with different donors and stakeholders but they did not attract any new donors' financial support after year 2004. Especially after 2007 they were desperately looking for a loan individually or collectively. In the year 2010, they decided to split up into five smaller groups. They believed that in smaller groups they would be more successful but during the year

¹ . The Small Grants Program is the small part of Global Environmental Facility (GEF) that tries to protect the natural environment by working with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs)

² . Rameh is a village about 55 kilometers north east of Garmsar, a small town about 100 kilometers east of Tehran. Based on the 1996 census, Rameh was almost empty of population. But the 2006 census showed Rameh included 70 households, about 350 people, who transmigrated to Garmsar, mainly in the fall and winter (Shahhoseiny 2007(1385 solar), 167-169).

2010 they showed the least amount of activity as a group (smaller or original one). Were these women empowered enough to arrive at a new stage of interacting with the community/society at a higher level? Or is it the case that they simply could not remain in the public sphere of their community without some donor's support? This article tries to figure out whether these women felt empowered enough to be sustained in the community.

Methodology

Choosing the proper method is very important to find the right answer for a scientific question. Regarding the context of Iran and its high sensitivity about women, the method would be even more important in this research. On the other hand, "Empowerment" is a complicated concept including qualitative and quantitative variables. Given the situation, I have learned that using the mixed method helps the researcher get closer to different aspects of reality (Creswell, 1994: 175-178).

To reach the right answer I attached myself to this community for about 7 years as researcher and sometimes as a facilitator. Based on the long term relationships which developed between the researcher and women of the Association, this research could be categorized as qualitative; but a quick survey was added to the research (2008-2009) in order to collect some quantitative data too. Long term relationships let us meet and talk to the majority of the Association's members. About 30 members were interviewed. The members also took part in focus group discussions. We visited them in their houses from time to time and talked with them about their team work and their daily life. As a member of a team of facilitators who worked with them, I was more than a passive observer. This position let me be familiar with their problems both in the public domain of their community and in the private sphere of their home. This feature let us be closer to the life they had to lead every day.

A questionnaire was also prepared to gather some quantitative data about their experiences. The questionnaire worked fine for the young women in and out of the group, but most of the old ladies did not like to answer the questionnaire. So we did semi structured interviews to implement the questionnaire. Each interview and focus group discussion seemed like a journey to their life histories. We conducted semi structured interviews but most of the time our interactions were open-ended (Reinharz, 1992: 18-21). Adopting Shahla Haeri's methodological approach "shared ethnography" that she successfully applied to her research in Pakistan (2002), I designed a similar participatory research to enable members of the Association to participate in various steps of the research. My objective was not only to create a trusting situation for our interaction, but to be enabled to observe the women's interaction among themselves. Therefore members were not just a target group for collecting data but also active partners in the data collection process.

Microfinance and Empowerment of Women

There are different definitions of the concept of empowerment. But I like the following definition because it looks at empowerment as a kind of social action. Empowerment is a social action process by which individuals, communities, and organizations gain mastery over their lives in the context of changing their social, economic and... environment to improve equity and quality of life (Peterson and Hughey, 2004: 533). Thus empowerment is a multi-level process which is a primary purpose of developmental intervention. In developing countries, mostly, women work at the community level and home (which is known as private sphere); while men work in the formal economy and government (known as public sphere) (Stall and Stocker, 1998: 731-732). The point is whether developmental interventions, like microcredit projects, can change this traditional dichotomy.

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional concept including:

- Personal empowerment which is about the power that each individual person attains
 - Collective empowerment which is about the interpersonal relationships, cooperation, networking, etc.
 - Economic empowerment which is about the opportunities in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Economic empowerment has both a personal and a collective empowerment aspect.
 - Political empowerment which is about the women's participation in political issues (local or national).
- Even though this is one of the important dimensions of empowerment and has both personal and collective aspects, it was not considered in this study.

Julia Elyachar declared that in the 1990s empowering women via microloans is all the rage (2010). Gender was a very important attribute in this process. But in the early years of development the bulk of the poor were seen as members of families headed by male small farmers. Their poverty could be overcome by subsidized agricultural credit that would raise productivity and incomes. In the 1980s the development planners noticed that

the poor were mostly women. Some UN agencies, governments, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are taking action to facilitate the empowerment of women in developing countries; such initiatives are focusing on promoting activities that reduce poverty inflicted on rural women (Moyle and Dollard, 2008: 153). Microfinance or microcredit includes some efforts to improve the quality of financial services which are available for poor and very poor people (Kotir and Obeng-Odoom, 2009: 86-87).

Moyle and Dollard observed the role played by these stakeholders in India to improve the opportunities and resources available to rural women. In India one empowerment strategy is implementing programs for training, employment, and building of assets. 2001 was announced as the year of women's empowerment to enhance the awareness of the links among development, empowerment, progress, and gender equality; with socio-economic progress identified as a direct link to the empowerment of women. The empowerment of women continues to be a focus that supports the goal of achieving the elimination of poverty and hunger among rural communities (Ibid: 154). The Indian Government also believed that low education and literacy rates restricted access to information and resources offered by formal institutions which would otherwise provide support and services for women. Furthermore, Moyle and Dollard also considered what various researchers have mentioned as further attributes which impress women's empowerment negatively; for example being a victim of domestic violence, restricted social roles, limited communication with spouse, lack of decision making, and no income spending rights. They believed that such experiences lead to a decline in a woman's health and well-being. According to them all these factors contribute to the low socio-economic status of rural indigenous women. Under such circumstances rural women must become empowered in order to shift adversity and move away from poverty. To move from a state of dependency to a situation of independence, women require encouragement and support (2008: 154).

Moreover, Elychar mentioned that the women were the people who worked in informal microenterprises and small loans could permit them to establish or expand income generating activities. Raising women's incomes might empower them financially and socially (Matinet. Al, 2002: 274). On the other hand in the 1990s, the women in development (WID) and gender and development (GAD) discourses broadened to examine the gendered impacts of economic globalization. Focusing on the effects of capitalist processes across the entire world rather than just the so-called developing countries; feminist economists and sociologists reformulated theories and research methodologies. Some extended their focus to include flows of different elements like people, goods, services, and also capital internationally (Pyle & Ward, 2003:462; Bose et. al, 2009: 74).

Elychar also noted the extent to which development institutions, particularly in their search to empower, have embraced antidevelopment, as their praxis. This new tendency can be observed in training programs linked to micro lending schemas funded by different development agencies like World Bank (2002: 495). She also mentioned that the earlier phase of extensive research and funding efforts devoted to the survival strategies of the poor (whether or not described in terms of the informal economy) has more recently been bolstered by the rise of the concept of social capital. Supporting the social networks called "social capital" was an aim of microlending. Moreover, with this conceptual transformation, the social networks of the poor can be seen as important ingredients of economic success writ large (2002: 507).

Hill believes that microcredit and similar strategies for creating work do not typically make a transition from the informal to the formal sector of the economy possible (Hill, 2001: 443) but they do have a significant impact on the work done in the informal sector. Hietalahti and Linden mentioned that the small enterprise foundation plays an important role in strengthening women's welfare in their study area. By providing financial services and through those job opportunities, it influences powerfully rural women's socio-economic situation and improves their sense of financial security (2006:209).

However recently, the poor have been conceptualized as a heterogeneous group of vulnerable households with complex livelihoods and varied needs. Micro financing could be a means for achieving household priorities like medical expenses or school fees. On the other hand micro financial services provided some spaces for external agents to intervene in the area of finance for the poor (Elychar, 2002:507). Social class variables as well as gender norms therefore intervene to limit the empowerment of women through occupational mobility and economic rewards (Jayaweera, 1997: 418).

Based on different theoretical approaches the concept of empowerment contained different dimensions which will be explained in the following parts.

Economic Empowerment

Usually economic empowerment is the very first step of the process of empowerment and it is hard to empower women without paying attention to financial and economic aspects of women's daily life. Thus the development planners cannot even think about the empowerment without mentioning the economic aspect of it. Microcredit is one of the important programs that tries to empower women starting through economic empowerment. Matin mentions that the economic environment of the poor has two features that have significance in shaping their use of financial services: 1- they operate in a mini-economy in which production, consumption, trade/exchange, saving, borrowing, and income earning all occur in very small amounts. Its effect is that transaction costs (both direct and indirect) tend to be high as the "unit" of transaction is generally minuscule. 2- There are high levels of insecurity and risk because flows of income and expenditure commonly do not coincide. This is sometimes due to household specific factors (loss of earnings through sickness, urgent medical expense, premature death, theft, insecure conditions of employment) and sometimes due to broader environmental factors (natural hazards, harvest failure due to drought or flooding, national economic crisis, bank malfunction in the formal sector, a break down in security) (Ibid: 275).

Looking at women's daily lives, there is no doubt that raising income is one important feature of economic empowerment, but there is a hypothesis which indicates that there is a shift in the role of women from unpaid family workers to managers if the men migrate (Bose et. al, 2009: 79). Thus in men's absence women's financial and economic situation may change and they can take charge of financial responsibility and make financial decisions. Some experiences in Iran showed that money and its availability for women plays a key role in the process of empowerment. The impact of their income generating activities on the children, especially daughters, is very important (Shaditalab, 2002 (1381)),

Personal Empowerment

Moyle and Dollard mentioned that the rural/indigenous women in the way of economic empowerment need a certain level of personal will to take the responsibilities of their livelihoods (2002: 160). They believe that personal empowerment will be achieved by assisting women to confront the ways in which «they internalize their social status and by challenging this view to realize their inner potential. » They also believe that «by increasing self confidence and self-esteem, a woman's self-perception can alter, contributing to increased personal power. » They relied on Moser's understanding to conceptualize the personal empowerment. Income is one important aspect of it. They also believed for rural and indigenous women, personal empowerment is focused on internal qualities. The right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of changes of their personal and family life through the ability to gain control over material and non-material resources could be a very critical aspect of personal empowerment (2002: 161).

Microcredit idea relies on cooperation since each member is responsible for the repayment of the loan made to the group. Moreover, women have to be part of a small group to receive a microloan (Karim, 2008: 17; Yunus, 2007). Thus the women who receive microcredit are supposed to see themselves as group members. They are also supposed to be actively tied with the other members of the group but in real life they see themselves as a member of their own family. Therefore their social obligations go to their family members and not the members of their microcredit group. An experience in Honduras showed that microloans do not always create a clear and un-structured path toward financial autonomy for women, since the unexpected consequences of microcredit may increase women's dependence on their family members to manage the debt (Vonderlack-Navarro, 2010: 132).

Education is considered as the first and most important indicator of women's empowerment. Moreover, education is an agent of socio-economic mobility for the individual. There is a large body of literature about education as a key factor of the women's empowerment. Education is known as an indicator of the status of women. It is known as an agent to empower women by widening the women's knowledge and skills. Education has been considered as an important dimension of developing a skilled work force and economic development by functionalist theorists¹ (Jayaweera, 1997: 411-412). Thus it is expected that during an empowerment process women would like to improve their education because it will widen their personal abilities and opportunities as well.

Collective Empowerment and Networking

¹. Jayaweera mentions that there is no consequential relationship between education and many facets of empowerment.

Networking is another aspect of the process of empowerment. At the traditional community level women draw support from their extended family network. Does empowerment lead to formation of new support networks? Matin discusses saving money among poor people as one of the most important methods for managing monetary issues and supporting one another. Matin and his colleagues distinguished sort of reciprocal lending among the poor people which let them save some meager amounts of money. As an example of support, they lent some small amounts of rice etc. to one another (Ibid: 276). I also met a group of rural women who decided to form a local fund to gather their small amounts of money for the time they need some¹. During the process of empowerment women are supposed to relate to one another for solving problems. It makes them feel they are not alone and could interact with the formal sector, especially economic formal sector of the society.

Planners believe women who benefit from microloans use their income for all family members. Promoting their financial situation makes them take new roles in their own family². On the ground of new roles in the family it is expected that the balance of power among the family members is changed. So it is about gender relations within the family. There is conflicting evidence on this issue in Asia in micro studies. Despite patriarchal values reflecting the almost universal acceptance of a male head of household in official documentation and in public perceptions, in practice joint decision making in family matters is more prevalent than is recognized (Jayaweera, 1997: 422). Thus the process of empowerment makes women play a role in the family's decision making process.

Introducing the Association of Women Beekeepers

In the year 2000 a developmental intervention began in Rameh, a satellite village of Garmsar in Semnan province of Iran. After taking part in some workshops in village and town, fifty three women of Rameh decided to form an Association named "the Association of Women Beekeepers of Rameh". Based on the microcredit idea, the Association received \$2000 from Land and Water project³ as a development grant to start a business. The members of the Association did not have to repay the grant but had to save a meager amount of money. They formed a Fund and saved about \$2 each person per month (for a total of nearly \$500). It was the first step of their empowerment process because they bought some beehives. Every member received four beehives and they started their business. In the year 2002, the Agricultural Bank of Iran gave the 33 individual younger (below 40) members of the Association an interest and collateral free loan. The loan brought 10 more beehives for younger women and empowered them financially more than the elderly members. But after the first year many members, especially the younger women, began to lose or sell their bees. By the year 2004 they mostly did not own beehives any more.

In the year 2003 Small Grants Program approved the Association's proposal and based on a contract gave the Association \$17500. This grant was for environmental activities and not meant for the women beekeeping business. It was however granted based on their success as a collective of bee keepers. Despite their efforts, the women beekeepers, neither collectively nor individually, could attract any new donors after that.

The members of the Association had a meeting in the year 2009. No facilitator or donors were present in this meeting. They decided to split up into 5 smaller groups. Each smaller group has a head and includes about 10 members. All members of each smaller group lived in the same local area in Garmsar and some close satellite villages. They insisted that they could work much easier while they were working in smaller groups but despite this belief they did not start any new collective action or continue previous activities by the end of 2010.

In the year 2009 fifty one percent of the members of the Association were between 27-39 years old. About 7.5 percent did not mention their age and 41.5 percent were above 40.

The members of the Association are all married. About 45.3 percent of the members of the Association had 2 or less children. Two of them, about 4 percent, have 9 or more children. Median is 3 children and mode of the number of children among women of the Association is 2.

¹ . They live in a satellite village of Garmsar named Koushk.

² In another article named "Saving or Spending Money: Women Making Decisions in Central Iran" I discuss how the women's own family benefited from the money which they made.

³ . In the year 2000, some international and national donors like some UN agencies and national and local Government in Iran started a project in three different zones in order to manage the watershed of Hableh Rood (River) which included the three provinces of Tehran, Semnan and Mazandaran. The donors intended to improve public participation. They used micro loans as their strategy. Rameh, which is a satellite village of Garmsar, was part of this project. A group of facilitators from University of Tehran and Ministry of Jihad and agriculture went to Rameh to introduce themselves to the people. The Association of Women Beekeepers was formed based on this intervention.

Empowered Women Beekeepers

As soon as the financial intervention started the social aspects of the empowerment process started too. The women had to take part in some meetings to realize how they could take part in this opportunity. The women had to negotiate with their husbands to get permission to take part in workshops in town. Their first facilitator¹ said “Early meetings were held in the local mosque and the rural women used to sit behind the divider curtain. It was hard for them to talk. Gradually they began to leave the curtain behind while they were talking and progressively they changed their sitting place and moved into the men’s side. Men also learned to listen to them during this period (2-3 months)”. It seems that they started to improve their abilities for making interpersonal relationships before the economic empowerment started.

They voted for five representatives chosen from among them. Three representatives accompanied by one official and an elderly man traveled to the north of Iran to buy beehives. Each member received 4 beehives and started their business in the year 2001. Meanwhile the younger members, below 40, received a bank loan of about \$1000. The process of social and economic empowerment started.

Economic Empowerment

Women of Rameh, were used to making small amounts of money based on their traditional roles. But working as a member of the Association brought them an opportunity for making significantly larger sums of money. In the first year all members of the Association sold honey and made money, about \$448, or approximately \$38 per month. In the second year of their business the younger members bought 10 more beehives with the Agricultural Bank’s interest-free loan. This allowed the younger members higher earning capability despite the fact that the older women were better bee keepers. Compared to the amount of money which the women of Rameh used to make, this amount of money was quite reasonable for them to play new roles in family matters. A few of them showed self-confidence about financial matters. Ziba, a member of the Association who sold her beehives in the second year said, “If my husband took some of my financial advice we would not experience lots of economic troubles in our life”.

Women of the Association were deeply concerned about money. Whenever they were unsatisfied, monetary issues were at the center of their dissatisfaction. 14 members of the Association believed that if the membership of the Association does not bring them some opportunities to earn money, there is no reason for them to continue being a member of the Association. On the other hand about 10 people believed that they would like to work with the Association even if they could not make money. 6 members also told that they did not join the Association for earning money. But when the Association was separated in to 5 smaller groups, none of them was willing to work without the expectation of earning money. Interestingly 15 members of the Association believed that working with the Association promoted their financial awareness. Two of the representatives had this opportunity to learn about accounting.

Some members felt deeply powerful after working with the Association. For instance, 18 members announced that they could make money and lead a life like a man. About 8 members of the Association announced that they have had sustained income after joining the Association. The same members regarded beekeeping as their career. 9 members believed that “there is no need to be a member of the Association for earning income”. They also believed that they were skillful enough for earning income on their own. But 9 members were not sure that they could make money if the Association did not exist anymore.

Some members, about 7, announced that they had certain expectations about membership. The most important expectation was getting a salary which most did not. When the Association made a contract with a stakeholder for implementing an environmental project, this expectation increased. 24 members of the Association thought that they could earn good amount of money cooperating with the project which unfortunately did not come true.

Due to some interventions the members of the Association were divided into two groups and a gap formed between them. As it was mentioned before, the younger members (below 40) received an interest-free loan, about \$1000 from the Agricultural Bank of Iran. They were individually responsible² to repay it, so they did not share the loan with the older members who were not targets of the loan³. The older skilful members did not

¹ . Professor JalehShaditalab, the former director of women studies program at the University of Tehran, generously shared her experience with us.

² . The Bank just asked each younger member to guarantee another member’s loan.

³ . The facilitators asked the Bank to give the loan to all members but the Bank refused. They also asked the younger members to share the loan with the older member which was also declined. The younger members believed that while they are personally responsible for paying it back it is not reasonable to share it with the older members.

understand the reason which excluded them. They also never forgot this age discrimination. One of the older members believed that “this loan produced a lot of problems among the members of the Association”. She also believed that the older members were a better target for the loan because they were skillful enough to make money while the younger members used part of the loan for home stuff like a new TV and could not take good care of the bees bought by the loan. She mentioned the younger members lost their bees while “the older members made more money from fewer bees. The younger members did not want to work, they wanted money for shopping”.

Based on the environmental project, the Association was expected to make contracts with some men and facilitators as well. The members disagreed with this action. They wanted these people to work for the Association for free. The representatives paid less than the agreed-upon sum in the contract to all contractors but the membership were not satisfied and began to criticize the representatives. They also did not want to pay the project’s budget for some actions like publishing a book which the Association was obliged to publish. One of the representatives, Dina, believed that “the members of the Association could not accept to pay facilitators and specialists who cooperate with the Association. The members would like to keep the money for themselves”. It seemed that they could not see themselves in the position of a boss. Furthermore, they wanted the urban facilitators and specialists to lead them without expecting any payment. Some of them believe that even when they have money to pay to these people “it is not our duty but rather the government’s”. Despite the fact that they wanted everything to come from powerful outsiders named “government”, they could not put themselves in their shoes and put up with the requirements of these outsiders.

We had several focus group discussions but they mostly could not understand the restrictions and obligations which the donors and outsiders may have. Therefore when there was no donor available to connect them with the formal sector of the economy, at a time when they have already lost their bees and financial abilities, the women reasonably decided to split up. They wanted donors that would give them money and tell them what they can do to make money.

Personal Empowerment

One of the most important outcomes of the empowerment process is the personal empowerment. The women of Rameh could promote their abilities based on the sources of power made available to them.

One of the manifestations of their improved personal empowerment was how they treated their gold jewelry. Most of the members of the Association believed that wearing gold makes them feel powerful. They believed all women have this feeling. One of their representatives recalled how proud she felt when she had a lot of gold pieces to wear. She believed when she can buy some more pieces of gold she will feel even better. Traditionally their gold is something which belongs solely to them and decisions about what to do with it are also entirely theirs. A few of them sold their gold and gave the money to their husbands. They believed that losing the gold made them lose their sense of pride. They sacrificed the gold and money which they earned for their husband and children but at the same time they were not satisfied because they were not able to replace the gold or money. An interesting point is that they seriously criticized one of the members of the Association because she did not want to sacrifice anything. One of them said “because my husband had lots of debts I thought that I have to sell my pieces of gold”.

Working with the Association provided some new opportunities for them. Some of the women of the Association gained the ability of making money (they made some small amount of money traditionally but working with the Association some members found new ways for earning a bigger amount of money). But despite this feeling which owning gold brought for them, after working with the Association none of them reported a sharp increase in the amount of gold which belonged to them. The women of the community are very sensitive about gold. A few of the representatives wore some extravagant jewelry in some wedding ceremonies. The women of the Association wondered how they could afford such expensive things. They asked the facilitators to look into this issue. It was discovered that those jewelries were low cost fakes. Surely none of the women bought a noticeable amount of gold during the time of working with the Association.

It seemed personal empowerment as opposed to collective empowerment was their first priority. They kept the bees which membership brought for them, individually. After receiving the beehives they moved them near their houses and started their business individually. One of them told me that when the facilitator gave her a book about keeping bees she did not share it with the other members of the Association. She informed me that she had the book even now and it was quite useful in her honey business. Almost at the same time one of them

rented a small shop to sell inexpensive clothes to neighbors. She personally borrowed some money from her neighbors and began this new business. This business let her run her family while her husband was out of work. One of them also used to buy some clothes from Tehran and sell them to available clients in town. About 5-6 of them flew to Kish Island to buy some clothes etc. and sell them to neighbors and relatives in 2010.

After splitting up in the year 2009 they have not started any collective business. They mostly waited to receive some financial aid from outsiders to start collective business. It seems that they are only interested in starting a new collective business when a donor gives them money. Interestingly most of them were the members of a gharzolhasaneh fund¹ which gave them access to small interest-free loans. They obeyed the rules of this fund faithfully and put their money in it. I think they behave so because in the end the money belongs to individual members not the community.

One of the representatives, Dina², wanted to but never did register a cooperative to start a new collective business. She was criticized seriously by her sisters and parents³. They believed it was very dangerous for her to continue working with the community because people might start some rumors about Dina which would put her only daughter's future marriage at risk. One of the representatives was afraid that something bad may happen to her family and tried not to continue her work. But none of her family members, including her mother and sister, were as hard working as she was. I believe this fear was a sort of social control employed against Dina's social success. She said "in my group⁴Ziba and Fahimeh (two of her sisters) are concerned about what others are saying behind my back."

Despite all these obstacles, the women of the Association mostly decided to move on. They showed different levels of improvement in social, individual, and educational aspects of personal empowerment.

Education

Education is an important indicator of personal empowerment of women partly because women with higher education have better chances of employment. But it does not mean that education gives them equal opportunities with men. Class and gender are two variables which restrict the impact of education. The impact of class and gender in constraining occupational mobility is reflected in two distinct trends in many countries (Jayaweera, 1997: 418).

- Women with the same educational attainment but from different socio-economic classes follow different career paths: upward vertical mobility for those from families with economic resources and horizontal mobility in low pay, low skill jobs for the poor.
- Women compared to men with the same educational qualifications reach different levels in occupational status. The men typically have easier access to formal sector employment, managerial or technical jobs, and entrepreneurships.

Education at secondary and higher level is purported to improve the status of women in the family and enhance their role in decision making. Nevertheless the internalization of gender norms by many university-educated women and their passive acceptance of gender inequality in family relations and oppressive social practices such as dowry bargaining and domestic violence (Ibid) work as obstacles to women's attainment of a higher level of empowerment. Education and employment together appear to contribute more effectively to increasing the level of women's empowerment (Alirezanejad, 2007 (1386)).

All the members of the Association believed that education empowers women. The women of the Association mostly improved their level of education individually. They did not follow this aim as a collective action but they all said that working with the Association helped them pursue this desire. They were not successful students in school but they kept telling that they love to continue their education. Ziba said "I will not become a physician or a university professor but I could become a school teacher". About 17 percent of the members of the Association were uneducated. Only one of the original members has a B.A degree. She found a job and has not worked with the group since 2001.

Many members of the Association specified that when they became involved with development programs, they began to think about the significance of education. Some younger members of the Association actually

¹ . These funds are similar to ROSCAs (Rotating Savings and Credit Associations) which are very common in Asian societies.

² . The names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

³ . Dina's family members who also were the members of the Association believed that cooperating with the other members is such a waste of time and energy. Moreover they feared that she may become a victim of evil eyes.

⁴ . When the women of the Association separated into five smaller groups, Dina formed a group which included 10 women mostly from her family members like her sisters and mother.

decided to go back to school to gain higher degrees. Some of them became literate and a number of the women got their high school diploma. Some of them even dreamed about being a university student but none of them could achieve this desire. Some of them gained some certificates. For example younger women mostly gained a driving license. They also mostly received some training about keeping bees and drying fruits etc. Two younger representatives also received training about accounting.

Table 1: Distribution of Age and Education among the members of the Association in 2009¹

Age Category Education	unanswered	25-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56+	Total
Illiterate	1	0	0	0	0	1	6	1	9
Elementary	3	0	2	2	0	11	3	0	21
Intermediate and high school	0	2	5	1	1	0	0	0	9
High school Diploma and more	0	4	6	3	1	0	0	0	14
Total	4	6	13	6	2	12	9	1	53

We asked about 20 women of Rameh, regardless of their membership in the Association, “Does education change women’s life or not?” Of the 20 respondents, eighteen believed that education could change the women’s life positively. The other two respondents were not sure, so there is little disagreement. Women of the Association could be divided in to two subgroups:

- 1- Uneducated elderly women who possessed indigenous knowledge and were capable in handicrafts.
- 2- Younger educated (mostly intermediate and high school) women who did not have much indigenous knowledge and handicraft capabilities. They did not want to know more about indigenous knowledge. For example, they did not want to learn how to keep bees from the elderly villagers. They deemed such knowledge obsolete and instead they sought modern scientific knowledge. However their education was insufficient for taking those kinds of classes at a formal university setting. Moreover these members were more capable of negotiating with the outsiders and donors.

There were two different kinds of knowledge (semi modern and indigenous) in the village and it seemed that the indigenous knowledge was more useful for their bee keeping business. These two kinds of awareness could cooperate by complementing each other or compete against each other. In this case, because of some circumstances² they could not cooperate successfully. It seemed there was a sort of competition between these two groups of women. Therefore, this feature impressed their collective action and empowerment as well.

Collective Empowerment and Networking

Forming “the Association of the Women Beekeepers” was a collective action. This action was made to improve the public participation of women and promote their social relationships as a community. Even though the members identified with the Association, at times they chose to do things individually. Most notably they regularly chose to follow their financial concerns individually.

Only about 16 members (roughly a third) believed that as a member they have some idea about the future of the Association. All members believed that the membership of the Association made them become more visible in their community. Almost all (only two were unsure) women believed that being a member of the Association made them do more social activities. About 15 members believed that working with the Association taught them how to talk and convince a donor to support them. But despite this belief, they could not attract any new donors’ attention after year 2004. They mostly believed that the Association promotes their abilities in the social context. 15 members also believed that the membership made them be strong enough to lead their life better than women who were not a member of the Association. More than 15 members could imagine themselves as a representative of the Association and even wanted to be a representative. Despite all these positive attitudes some of them did not feel themselves powerful enough to go beyond their role as a member of the Association. For example, while 15 members believed that as an association they could produce something that urban or rural

¹ . Some members got their diploma and used the adult education system to promote their education level, so the situation at the beginning of the cooperation was different.

² . These circumstances are analyzed in another article by this author which at present is under review for publication.

women would purchase, 15 other members did not think that possible or were not sure. One of the donors observed that most of the members have accepted their social responsibilities. This is remarkable considering that their traditional responsibility is only to their family.

Despite their participation in collective activities many of the members did not feel that they are accountable to others. The representatives, especially Dina, had to shoulder all the responsibility for accountability. Furthermore, the representatives were criticized by the membership for some of the action they had to take to be accountable to donors. This situation made Dina want to be rid of the Association and cooperation with 50 plus women. When they were about to break up in 2009 this behavior made her choose 10 “reasonable” women from the members of the Association to work with but unfortunately they never actually started a new cooperation together.

Representatives, especially Dina, believed that the members of the Association left no room for them as individuals. Dina once said: “I suppose when I am about to die, the membership would expect me to ask for their permission first”. She had some ideas for her own life and business but the members did not let her to apply them or accused her of taking advantage of her position. She was in a paradoxical situation because at the same time she wanted to be rid of the Association, she also expressed her desires about working with it. But the most important paradox was the conflict between the desires of individual members of the Association and the desires of the association defined by what the majority of the members wanted to pursue. It seemed that the individual members wanted to be members of the Association, but they wanted their individual desires through this membership.

There were cultural obstacles against their collective empowerment as well, for example having deep fears of being a victim of evil eyes. When I asked them about their business and the reason which made them keep the beehives separately, they mentioned this belief. Moreover they did not want to help one another, for instance by giving advice, because “if something bad happened to their bees, they would think that I had evil eyes which victimized them”. Fear of evil eyes decreased trust among women and prevented collective action among them.

Another cultural obstacle was regarding the women’s relationship with their husbands. Some women who were not members of the Association told me that their husbands have not let them be in touch with some women of the Association, especially the representatives. Moreover sometimes men talked about the husbands of the women of the Association, especially the representatives’ husbands, as weaklings (*zanzalil* which means a man whose wife dominated him). The men’s community put pressure on these men to take control over their wives.

Unfortunately, there was not enough trust among them to keep them together. For instance, two younger representatives, Dina and Maryam, took part in a workshop. They had spent all day together, but when they got back home, Maryam asked Dina if the organizers of the workshop gave her any money. Maryam could not believe that Dina did not receive money for taking part in the workshop. Dina told me “Maryam’s question made me wonder whether she received any money herself”.

When a member of the Association confronted a problem or obstacle she did not ask another member of the Association for help but a family member. Age gap made this even worse to the point that the younger and older members wanted to talk to outsiders separately. The elderly members often criticized the younger women especially the way they dealt with monetary issues and business matters. One of the elderly women thought that “the younger women wanted their business to be a piece of cake”.

They criticized their facilitators in different ways but they deeply wanted the facilitators to be there for them. They also wanted to receive various kinds of support from the donors and outsiders¹. When the donors did not give them financial and informational support they felt that they were left alone in the middle a beautiful dream.

One reason that made the donors not support them for a second time is the weakness in their social and economic infra structure. The women had to register their Association as an economic firm and by doing so they had to pay tax which they believed they can not afford. Facilitators mostly think about registration as a problem because the registration process is bureaucratic and lengthy. However if they do not register they can not officially interact with the society/community collectively. As a result of the lack of registration, the Association stayed in the informal sector of the economy. This feature restricted their economic and social activities because legally they could not deal with the formal sector.

¹. Which they collectively referred to as “the government”.

Before their final breakup the members of the Association showed some wonderful collective action, for instance while they were seeding the pastures of the village. They also cared about the Association and in the first 7 years they actively took part in the meetings and workshops. However, as some members later described their actual interaction during the meetings, they never really talked to one another frankly.

In the year 2009 when they were deciding to split up, 12 members announced that there was no benefit for them to continue cooperating with the Association while 8 of them disagreed with this idea. Most were not sure. Interestingly at the same time about 15 members said that they are ready to cooperate with the Association voluntarily (without the expectation to be paid). The membership was uncertain and indecisive about what to do with the Association. Finally the idea of a break up prevailed. Some of them said "if the donors do not want to make decision for us, we better separate".

Women of Rameh had always taken part in traditional family networking. Doing their traditional duties they worked together in their homes to make some small amount of money, gathering fruits from their gardens collectively, and helping each other in family and religious ceremonies. Women of the Association were supposed to improve their connections while working with the Association, but they mostly said that when they were struggling with some problems they did not expect other members to be available for help. The women thought that just their own family members were the people who helped them. Therefore it is natural to find that the women's social obligation go to their family members like husband and children as well.

Women of the Association had several trips and site visits in and out of the province. During the site visits they met some entrepreneurial and innovative women. They had lots of stories about these trips and site visits and things they have learned from them but none of the women of the Association stayed in touch with these successful entrepreneurs. Apparently it never occurred to them that such contacts might be useful or helpful to them during hard times. One of the members of the Association told me that "we were visiting some places just because the facilitators asked us to. We had fun but nobody cared about us". It seemed they did not relate to the people whom they met during these trips and site visits.

When the women of the Association separated in to five smaller groups, they did not think about establishing a network which could connect the groups together. It seems they did not realize how much their relationships could be useful to them. Rumors were the only things connecting them together in the final months of 2010.

Empowerment in Family Relationships

The villagers all belong to family networks. The local oral historians believed that this community was formed by seven different families which had moved from various parts of Iran. These different families made a single family network during the years. The members of the Association found this feature as a positive and a negative at the same time. 18 members of the Association believed that they could establish the Association because they were part of a larger family network. But they did not believe that this characteristic made the Association work. Just 7 of them believed that since they were family, the Association had worked for 10 years. But 14 members disagreed with this idea.

A few members believed that because they were family, they never talked together directly and clearly. They believed this feature gave rise to some problems. But 12 members believed that membership of the Association improved their family relationships. They told me that the meetings of the Association produced an opportunity for them to see some family members that they do not meet often. On the other hand 6 members believed that the Association brought some tension among the members of the family network.

Husbands and children

Family is the most important institution in Iran, especially in rural areas. Men are the head of the family and usually they are the people who take the responsibilities financial or otherwise. Traditionally women needmen's permission to go out of the home. About 17 women claimed that their husbands supported them to participate in workshops and different activities of the Association. One of them believed that her husband supported her work, but he did not want her to go on the trips and site visits. 8 women said that their husbands did not cooperate and support their activities in the Association. While most of the women believed that working with the Association did not negatively affect their family roles, a few women said that it made them not be as good a wife and mother as they could otherwise be.

Women of the Association had the permission of their husbands to get involved with the Association of the women beekeepers. This permission, directly or indirectly, obliged them to spend the money which they had earned for family matters. About 12 women said that they promised to give the money they made to their

husbands¹ if they are given permission to take part in some workshops. Others gave some of the money they made to their husbands, spent some of it for buying furniture, and spent some for their children's needs. Fahimeh, one of the young members of the Association, said "I used to give my money to my husband" but it changed her husband's behavior and that led her to say "I was wrong". Another woman paid off her husband's car loan expecting him to pay her installments. The husband never did. It seems they believed that men prefer to pay for their own priorities not family's. Challenging their husbands was one of their most important endeavors. Some women succeeded. For example, Ziba convinced her husband to exchange his car for a cheaper one thus letting her use it for family and personal matters². A few of them decided to buy some furniture. They also could spend on their health more than before. Some even paid for their skin beauty etc.

The children were the first people who benefited from the money earned by women. Traditionally providing the girls' dowry was the most important duty of a woman of Rameh. But based on the amount of the money which they earned the boys' wedding party and also the children's education became the women's responsibility. Women could now make decisions about these issues.

They were always confronted with some contradictions. For example, the younger women mostly had to choose between their own desire to continue their education and their husband's education. Most of the younger women let their husbands continue their education and waited for their own turn. But despite all these features, 18 women strongly believed that "membership of the Association brought more power for women at home". Just about 3 women denied this idea. Making decisions and having a choice are among the most important aspects of empowerment. As a matter of fact women who have the right of choosing are powerful and whatever makes them lose this ability makes them weak.

Conclusion

The Association of Women Beekeepers was formed based on a developmental intervention named Land and Water project. The financial support which they received from this project provided the chance of starting a business and making money for them. They mostly earned money for about 2-3 years and meanwhile they could decide how to spend the money which they made. They decided to spend most of their money on what they, and their community, considered their foremost social obligation namely their husband and children. This led to better family relationships. They got more power at home and contributed in the family process of decision making even financial decisions.

In the meantime, they learned how to negotiate not just with their husbands and children but also with the facilitators and officials as well. They felt more self-confident because they could make money and make decisions on how to spend it. While they were not afraid to talk to officials and experts any more, they wanted the experts to tell them what they have to do.

Based on their social and economic infra-structure, they stayed in the informal section of the economy. Therefore, they were not in a situation to interact with the formal public sphere of their society. Not having any reasonable experience working with the formal economy made them not understand the outsiders enough to put themselves in their shoes. Moreover, lack of networking in and out of the community made them alone in confronting problems coming from the public sphere and the formal sector of the society.

Given the situation, the women beekeepers were mostly empowered personally and collective actions were stopped when the outside donors discontinued their presence. Their collective action was not sustained.

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¹ . Just 6 of them believed that their children have the same expectations.

² Typically men are not so willing to let their wives use the car if it is an expensive one.

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