

## Micro-Credit Programmes For Women Ignore Education

As a developmental intervention, micro-credit has assumed tremendous proportions. But there is also a need to understand micro-credit as the world's biggest financial lending programme ever, from the global context. Micro-credit is the biggest women's empowerment strategy, accepted and adopted across nations of varied socio-political and geographical contexts. Poor and developing countries, donor as well as banking institutions, have adopted micro-credit as the desirable strategy for development and as a magic bullet to solve all the problems of women. As such, micro-credit has historically been initiated and developed around women, resulting in the fact that women comprise more than 90% clients of micro credit in the world and more than 65% of total micro-credit disbursement.

Almost all poverty alleviation programmes now have women's groups mobilised to access credit for their families and communities and the goal of micro-credit is to establish profitable and financially self-sustainable programmes so that dependence on development (funding) agencies and State to meet the needs of poor women is reduced. Consonant with this vision of financial sustainability is the evidence of women's credit-worthiness, as women's repayment rates are higher. As a consequence, women who have had a history of invisibility in the field of economy and money have suddenly gained recognition as better managers of credit, despite the continuing invisibility of women as contributors to the production processes, denial of access to their produce and control over their money, and an unchanged social construction of division of labour.

However as micro-credit has emerged as the capitalist notion of an alternative to welfare and subsidy regimes the current trend of credit regimes in developing countries is related to the attempts of global financial and market players to impact the policies of such countries towards promotion of credit-based development in favour of global markets. Countries struggling with weak economies also find micro-credit to be a convenient means to serve the dual purpose of both development and revenue generation, with little investment required from the government. Thus credit and micro-credit is spread and promoted at every level, creating a vast market for credit from the local to the global.

Women are targeted because of their dependability, discipline and ability to work together thus the "group" provides a convenient peg for mutual finance principles to come into play, where women hold each other responsible for repayment, often despite the hunger and deprivation that exist in a defaulter's home. The imperatives of monitoring one another to ensure regular savings and repayment of loans requires a collective mode. But given that the onus of change is today on the shoulders of poor women, with reduced responsibility and accountability by other players, women must try to comprehend how powerful international forces have constructed the current credit-based model of development.

As the standard of education of these women is mostly poor, there is an urgent need for women's organisations to help them gain this understanding. Although micro-credit is touted as the solution for all "evils," women are denied the right to educational opportunities now that governments have presented the creation of micro-credit forums as the primary strategy for the empowerment of women. Providing women access to education is not a priority of micro-credit lending and most programmes have adopted a welfare approach to women when the real need is for a "rights-based approach."

Within the context of micro-credit, these power relations involve numerous players - ranging from husbands, the family, to the State and national and international financial institutions. But by examining this phenomenon through the lens of education helps us to focus on "processes" and not just "outcomes." As for the women involved in micro-credit programmes, the importance of education cannot be overstated as this is critical if they are to be able to understand how micro-credit programmes work. Educational interventions enhance women's ability to exercise choices and negotiate their own terms without having to conform to norms or outcomes defined for them.

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