A Botswana Rural Women's Transition to Urban Small Business Success: Collective Struggles, Collective Learning

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Abstract: *Although (75%) of women who move from rural areas to urban areas engage in small businesses, most of these small businesses never grow due to problems related to patriarchal structures. Context, non-competitive networking, and experiential learning are necessary to negotiate patriarchy for Botswana women's business success.*

Introduction

In Botswana an increasing number of women migrate from the rural areas to urban areas due to economic hardships in the rural areas that are characterized by poverty and lack of employment opportunities. Although most (75%) of those engaged in the unregulated sector are women, a majority of these businesses never grow (Daniels, 1990). They either fail completely or remain at the initial stage of occasional street vending. Mead (1994) found that in Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe most enterprises that started with 1-4 workers never expanded; further less than 1% employ ten workers. Research elsewhere and in the region (Nattrass, 1990) suggest that this situation could be explained by problems related to patriarchal structures, colonial experiences, apartheid, and the international division of labor. In spite of the barriers research elsewhere and in Botswana shows that a small number of women have been able to develop enterprises that have demonstrated remarkable growth. So we know that some women are successful in micro-enterprises but to date there is no research detailing the process in terms of what the few women went through, how they made the transition and factors that contributed to their success. The focus of this study was to understand how women learn how to move from unemployment in the rural areas that are characterized by poverty and lack of employment opportunities to owning successful small businesses within the formal sector of urban Botswana.

Relevant literature

The informal sector in Southern Africa shares most of the basic characteristics of the informal economy in developing countries and other regions of Africa in terms of activities, female dominance, unregulated operations and problems such as lack of capital and markets, the system of patriarchy, and oppressive economic systems. Because of a history of regional migration to South Africa from all countries in the region, there are high rates of female-headed households. A study in Botswana by Jefferis (1997) found that the average of such households was between 33-40%.

Access to financial services is gender-biased in Southern Africa. Recent studies in Botswana and the region (Grosh & Somolekae, 1996; Bolnick, 1992) show that the vast majority of women have no access to financial services. They require collateral, rapid loan processing procedures and convenient locations for financial services (Bolnick, 1992). This is a problem for women's businesses because as Rhyne and Otero (1992) put it "Financial needs of families or at least of individual enterprises are often not separate from the financial needs of enterprises themselves– this particularly true for enterprises owned by women" (p. 1565). In Botswana, financial service legislation is based on the patriarchal system that treats women as minors and at best as housewives. For example, all married women do not qualify for loans from commercial banks unless the husbands authorize the bank to process their loans. With male migration to South Africa and recently to urban areas in Botswana, most women have no choice but to go into informal business. Governments have also been criticized for the absence of realistic policies even where there is evidence that the informal economy has created employment. Although governments in the region differ because of different political histories, they share some things in common, such as lack of gender-focused policies. Such policies are not there because the prevailing opinion is that women have a nurturing role, hence are dependent on the kinship

systems. In addition, women in the informal sector operate in hostile environments. For example, there are occasional cleaning campaigns where rural women working in the urban informal sector are forced to go back to the rural areas and work in agriculture.

In Botswana existing literature on the efforts made by both government and non-government to assist women in the informal sector on both access to capital and skill training shows that most women are not benefiting from these programs (Women's Affairs Division, 1995). Training programs for women in the informal sector have tended to focus on the acquisition of knowledge in technical and craft skills as well as commercial knowledge. Lack of education has been identified as a barrier to the performance of small businesses. According to Somolekae (1994), "In Botswana 39% of the entrepreneurs have no formal education and an additional 53 % attended only primary schooling" (p. 1881). While specialized training is important, success in business depends on training interventions that are gender sensitive (Burckhart, 1996). This type of training has been overlooked in the training given to the informal sector.

In spite of the barriers faced by women in the informal sector, recent empirical research elsewhere and in Botswana (Osirim, 1992; Daniels, 1992) shows that a small proportion of independent businesswomen have enterprises that have demonstrated remarkable growth. Kapchan (1996) observed that in Morocco, businesswomen in the informal sector find that practices in the marketplace conflict with their traditional roles and values. Understanding how women have been able to successfully overcome their disadvantaged positions in complex business communities is crucial for developmental change.

Theoretical Frameworks

Recent interest in improving the lot of women in developing countries has led feminists and educators alike to stress improved educational and employment opportunities as critical means for women to attain greater control over their lives. For example, according to Molhotra and Mather (1997) education and employment are seen as the resource base essential for women to acquire greater independence from patriarchal constraints. Informed by the feminist economic development perspective (postmodern/post-structuralist) and the adult learning theories (informal/accidental and experiential), the purpose of this study was to understand how Botswana women learn how to move from poverty and unemployment to owning successful formal small businesses in an urban setting. These businesses started as unregulated businesses.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design that used in-depth, semi-structured interviews for data collection. The sample selection of 13 purposively selected small businesswomen reflected diversity in age, education, and number of years in business and type of business. Two research questions guided this study; (1) what situational and personal factors are associated with the success of women in the small business sector? Which factors facilitate the process? Which factors impede the process? (2) How do women negotiate personal and situational barriers so that their businesses can succeed?

Findings

Data analysis guided by the constant comparative method revealed that small business success for women should be understood within a specific context. The context for the participants of this study was defined as the interrelated nature of patriarchy and community orientation that emphasized a culture of sharing. The women's conception of context varied. At times they interpreted it as a macro-level trigger of personal events, other times as a barrier in finding solutions to their business problems, and occasionally as a benevolent patron offering potential opportunities.

Context

Patriarchy. Participants mentioned that in a context where there is a preference for boys, the society appreciates the hard work, intelligence, courage, and family economic responsibility of women in small businesses but not the woman as a person. Betty observed that her father described her hard work in this way; "In Betty, God almost gave me a boy." As an advantage, their patriarchal society ensures that businesswomen have access to free family labor. The social responsibility of women as care takers (mothers, daughters and wives), coupled with legislation that perceives women as minors were cited as restricting businesswomen's business movements.

Community orientation. This was described as the emphasis on sharing goods and services as well as the upliftment of one another, whether family or community member. Community orientation in this context sees the family unit as a source of support network in terms of provision of labor and information. At the business level, community orientation actually laid the bases for the participants non-competitive support strategy. Through its emphasize on communal survival, community orientation has influenced businesswomen to see their businesses as a means of self-actualization and their contribution to their sharing tradition of society. Finally, community orientation has helped to define business interaction as demonstrated by the women in this study. While some women adhere to the non-confrontational approach, others have used the same community orientation to adopt a challenging mode, especially when it comes to articulating gender inequalities.

Personal Factors

In addition to contextual factors (patriarchy and community orientation) that could facilitate or impede success of women's businesses, participants also identified social responsibility and persistent resilience as personal factors crucial for success. All mentioned that the need for money was not the motivation for success in business; rather, they all had a socially driven motivation. As one woman expressed it, "I think I have a passion for making a difference in other people's lives." Persistent resilience as described by participants involves suffering, perseverance, and willingness to take risks, and a high level of commitment to achieving business success. They stressed that every woman who wants to succeed in business within a patriarchal context has to adopt the strategy of persistent resistance. Patriarchal hegemony or the act of men exercising control without the use of force or any cohesive mechanism was another problem lamented by the participants.

Negotiating Patriarchy

Non-competitive networking. The major strategy and one that is said to be the backbone of the success of small businesswomen is non-competitive networking. This was defined as the tradition of relying on one another for financial assistance, labor, comfort, moral support, transportation, and problem solving for both business and family related issues. Participants noted that non-competitive networking manifested itself at three levels: family business and community. In addition to being on the receiving end of the family networks support, participants also mentioned that support was reciprocal in that they used their businesses to help the family directly or indirectly. Women pride themselves on their businesses as a first source of employment for family members.

Work or business networks refers to reciprocal relationships with other businesswomen. This included the sharing of business ideas, positive and negative experiences, frustrations, problems, and giving one another material support. Sharing family chores of other businesswomen was also cited as crucial for success in business. Through community networks, some participants reported having bartered some business items so that they can be perceived as culturally informed business role models. Others mentioned that they were known as anchors of their social networks in the city. Community networking extends beyond the villages and cities of Botswana to the region and internationally.

Pressure group approach. Another approach that small businesswomen use to negotiate barriers was through organizing themselves into pressure groups to question the unfair treatment from the City council authority and financial institutions. Participants of this study believe that as survivors of patriarchal harassment and role models of women's success in business, they are in a better position to mobilize and demand rights of women in the informal sector.

Learning Required for Success

Findings on learning and training that participants required also revealed their learning styles. The first type of learning, informal pre-business skill training was received from either a family member, through observation at a job situation, or through the use of "common sense" or the individual's ability to assess her situation and come up with a viable solution to resolve problems. This form of learning provided skills that participants associated with either their socialization as young girls growing up in their villages or as employees in business-related jobs. Although at the time of training they did not know that they would go into business, informal pre-business skill training is perceived as very important for the success of women's small business. The second type of learning, formal technical skill training was

acquired through workshops, in-service training or specialized schools. In this context, formal technical skill training referred to training resulting in certification and in-service or on-the-job training. According to the participants in-service training is particularly valuable for training their own employees, other businesswomen, and even young girls who want the skills for future use. Those who went for formal training, especially workshops, did not find them particularly useful because the delivery was not directed at their felt needs. The third type was business-embedded learning, which manifested itself in problem solving, demonstration, and modeling, and learning from others. This kind of learning takes place in businesses on a day-to-day basis. Participants of this study believe that growing businesses develop their own unique functional system of operation.

Discussion of Findings

Participants in this study confirm that context is a key ingredient in both the business and learning process. However, context in the literature is mainly referred to and studied in an organizational context characterized by the corporate culture of the organization where learning takes place (Howe, 1991, Marsick & Watkins, 1990). The contribution of this study is viewed as adding to the definition of the social and cultural context in terms of the impact of patriarchy and community orientation. The context influenced the kind of businesses that participants went into as well as how they managed their businesses. This is not surprising given that these women had very little education (Grade 3 to Grade 12) and no formal business training prior to starting their businesses.

The role of the family in the business context confirms findings of business management studies that suggest that role models are important in affecting the decision to start a business. A recent study (Ismail, 1998) in Malaysia shows that past family experience in business; even at a low performing scale, affects women's entry into an entrepreneurial career. This study, however, expands this literature by showing that while the family is crucial in women's success in business, it is not necessarily positive. In this study, the Botswana cultural context that expects behavior such as being caretakers of other people, especially in marriage, is an obstacle to women's going into business. In addition, going against family norms, such as divorce and

having children out of wedlock, can disappoint the family, which has power and control of resources necessary for the survival of each family member. The loss of economic support from family caused participants in this study to need money; hence they ventured into business.

Personal characteristics found in this study were congruent with results of studies conducted in other developing countries in both Africa and Latin America. These studies show that economic success depends to some extent on personality traits (Ismail, 1998; Burckhart 1996; Bakke-Seeck, 1996). This study, however, adds another dimension. According to the findings of this study, personality traits are informed by the cultural context. In Botswana the driving force for wanting to be successful in business at all costs is the cultural expectation of being economically responsible to the extended family. In addition, there is the social motivation to want to "give back" something to one's community, a part of the cultural socialization or community orientation as described by these participants. Betty sums it up for all the participants when she says, "Knowing that I have given other people (her employees and graduates of her hairdressing training school) an opportunity to give back something to their families and communities is what is more satisfying in life."

The major strategy that is perceived as the pillar of women's small business success is informal non-competitive networking. Given that women's movements in Africa and elsewhere have often been associated with working class struggles, the findings of this study underscore the notion that networking as a support system permeates all facets of their lives. Furthermore, participants of this study described their networking as non-competitive. This finding supports African feminists literature (Mbilinyi, 1996; Oduol & Kabira, 1995), which argues that to overcome the legacy of patriarchy in Africa, women's movements have to build on their traditional modes of organizing.

A major contribution of this study to this feminist literature is that women are not simply acted upon by harassment from male-dominated societies. With economic independence, women are empowered to actively negotiate and mobilize to challenge hegemonic forces for change. Similarly, through non-competitive networks, small businesswomen in Botswana have a subculture with its own tradition and power structure that not only undermines the

capitalist approach to development, but also could possibly be used to restructure gender relations in this context.

Conclusions

The findings of this research offer theoretical and practical implications for adult education, and the role of women's businesses in economic development. First the viability of the unregulated economy as a rich venue for informal and incidental learning is strongly supported in this study. The concept of experiential learning, that adults reflect on lived experiences to construct knowledge that can be transferred to new situations, was also upheld in this study (Fenwick, 1999). Participants of this study explained that, they identified their relevant pre-business skills through reflection. In addition through critical reflection, they also evaluated the formal business training that they attended and concluded that the delivery system was not relevant to their learning styles (i.e. hands-on and group experiential learning). Preference for informal learning was not surprising given participants' culture and comparatively low levels of education.

The findings of this study especially non-competitive networking and emphasis on personalized instead of institutionalized training, show that networking and training are gendered concepts. The participants' business success, which was achieved through non-competitive activities, challenges the perceived value of competition in business. Based on the finding that business success is not about the individual but is routed in the culture of sharing, there is need for Botswana business educators to develop more culturally relevant curricula.

Finally, another finding of this study, which has implications for practice, is participants' emphasis on the collective. With low levels of education, this study showed that small businesswomen depend a lot on information coming through their own channels. Based on this finding, cooperatives for small businesswomen are recommended along with a government policy intervention to strengthen the non-competitive networks needed. These cooperatives will be useful for the dissemination of information to members. In Africa building confidence individually has limitations, but as a group small businesswomen's cooperatives can have a stronger voice and help each other to build self-confidence.

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