Thinking Critically About Women’s Entrepreneurship in Developing Countries

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Helping women to achieve financial autonomy—at all levels of any economy—is a form of activism for women’s rights that holds positive implications for family wellbeing, community viability, and national prosperity. Supporting women’s entrepreneurship in developing countries has become a particularly popular cause in the past five years and I have been pleased to be part of that movement. My intention here is to call attention to obstacles and puzzles I have observed as a researcher documenting specific projects, but also to raise a few questions about the context and trajectory of the work, taken as a whole. This essay is intended as a moment of reflection, a thoughtful step aside from the concerted push that women’s entrepreneurship has become.

I have been involved in many prominent efforts to create and evaluate support systems for female entrepreneurs. My colleagues and I published the first independent evaluation of Avon (in South Africa), a system that has become a template for many seeking to build networks of entrepreneurs among poor women in developing countries. My team was the first on the ground to study the award-winning Jita system in Bangladesh, an Avon-like network built by CARE to serve rural poor women. We are now building the measurement system for the Walmart Empowering Women Together program all over the world. I have also advised the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women and evaluated one of their global programs. I have taught on the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women course. I have served on the US State Department subcommittee for Women’s Access to Markets—and I have worked closely with three small women’s entrepreneurship groups in a very remote part of Uganda.

I feel all these experiences give me an unusual perspective on the state of affairs in women’s entrepreneurship support. Thus, though I will draw implicitly on published research and will illustrate my arguments with data, I am speaking here from the informal viewpoint that emerges from having had a role that crossed so many projects.

Recalling the Objectives

A few core objectives motivate the emphasis on women’s entrepreneurship. In the developed countries, support for female entrepreneurship is part of a general push
to stimulate growth. The focus on growth applies also to men’s entrepreneurship, of course, but the notion that women lag behind men in both starting businesses and achieving growth calls more attention to the females. For the developing countries, however, the core emphasis in international discourse shifts strongly toward women’s entrepreneurship as a poverty alleviation strategy. The poverty agenda comes into play largely because women invest earnings in children and community, thus producing a positive ripple effect that does not manifest in the same way for men’s incomes. Facilitating women’s entrepreneurship thus has become a preferred tactic for economic development.

For all countries, the call to support women’s entrepreneurship also falls under an overall charge to “close the gender gap” across economic domains, including formal employment, financial access, and so on. Such calls have come from the World Bank and OECD, for instance, and tend to focus on the generalized benefits that are believed to accrue from gender equality, including better use of national resources, reduction in disease and hostility, improved human capital, as well as increased growth.

In the figure below, I have mapped The Economist Intelligence Unit’s composite, called “Women’s Economic Opportunity,” against “National Competitiveness,” a World Economic Forum index that reflects a country’s use of resources. The Women’s Economic Opportunity index is composed of many factors, including not only conventional economic measures like labor participation but a wide range of other factors not normally thought to be economic in nature, such as efforts to stop violence against women and adolescent fertility. I chose this indicator because one of my aims in this essay will be to argue for a broader view of the gender context for women’s entrepreneurship programs.


You can easily see that there is a strong correlation between these two measures. Perhaps it is intuitively evident that a country making concerted
efforts to protect, support, educate, and place its women would be making similar decisions across the board to maximize its other resources. The relationships among the factors that constitute the Women’s Economic Opportunity index, however, are perhaps less obvious.

Placing women’s entrepreneurship within the overall call to close economic gender gaps thus reminds us of the importance, but also the complexity, of the task before us. Measurements reported by international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Economic Forum do recognize that multiple factors produce this form of inequality. In the graph below, I have outlined a typical conceptualization, in which gender standing is founded on measurements from four general domains: economics, education, health, and political participation. In turn, these larger domains are composed of an array of contributory factors.

![Gender Index Chart]

Source: This table is based on the World Economic Forum gender index.

The general practice is to combine the measures from the bottom up to arrive at the gender index. However, the schema does not show the causalities that may occur between the factors, even across the broad domains. For instance, an increase in girls’ education is strongly associated with a reduction in adolescent fertility (which in turn reduces infant and maternal mortality, as well as the overall fertility rate), but also with an increase in labor force participation. Thus, an investment in girls’ education would be expected to
improve national prosperity by increasing the labor supply (and its quality), but also by reducing the costs associated with high fertility among teens.

To grasp how these factors could interrelate in this way, one must understand that gender practices on the ground often keep girls from continuing in school, usually by forcing them into reproductive roles early. Once you comprehend the relationships among practices, it becomes easy to see why items like the incidence of early marriage would be so strongly correlated with national wealth. And, it becomes clearer why the development community increasingly treats gender inequality as a cause, rather than an outcome, of impoverishment.

Being aware of gender-specific practices that constrain a woman’s ability to own, control, and grow her own business is just as important as understanding the gender-specific impediments to education. Further, we should always remind ourselves that the overall objectives driving the women’s entrepreneurship agenda rest on specific expectations regarding gender effects on communities. Finally, we should remember that “gaining the benefits” of inclusion is a purposefully positive way to spin “avoiding the damage” caused by inequality. That’s because many of the restrictions that have created and enforced women’s economic disadvantage are still in place around the world; therefore, much of what we actually confront on the ground are the negative practices of exclusion.

**National Difference**

Gender indices vary by nation in a general pattern that shows more equality associated with greater national wealth and greater inequality associated with poverty, but also hostility and instability. Within that overall pattern, specific national practices and policies will affect the freedoms of women and thus the potential effectiveness of programs designed to support them in business ownership. Generally speaking, a high degree of restriction on women will hold across the board: if there are few reproductive rights or protections against violence, there will also likely be more restrictions on financial access. These national differences should be taken into account when planning and evaluating programs, but in my experience that seldom happens.

Using data from the World Economic Forum and the Economic Intelligence Unit, Booz & Company has designed a systematic index that addresses economic policy towards women. The “Third Billion” index encompasses both the inputs of policy and the outputs that result. Outputs are grouped into inclusion measures (female-to-male wage ratio, ratio of labor force participation), advancement measures (female-to-male ratios in professions, leadership, ownership), and equal pay for equal work. On the “input” side is included education and training opportunities (“preparation”) employment
inclusion ("access-to-work"), and support conditions for women’s enterprise ("entrepreneurial support"). In turn, each of these inputs is a combination of sub-measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Booz &amp; Co Inputs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Third Billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea, Rep</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia and Herzegovina</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For instance, "entrepreneurial support" is composed of the Economist Intelligence Unit’s assessment of women’s access to technology and energy, female property ownership rights, training availability for females, women’s access to finance, various indicators of credit availability, and financial services delivery. Booz does not reveal its calculations, but the report commentary suggests some of reasons for variation.

For instance, Tanzania is exhorted to enforce women’s equal property rights through the courts. Countries in sub-Saharan Africa often have formal statutes giving equal property rights, but local councils and tribal laws often ignore the statutory rights of women, adhering to older codes that give property rights exclusively to men. Consider: it is common for published research on women’s entrepreneurship to observe that women have fewer collateralized loans than men (one factor deemed to cause their “underperformance” as entrepreneurs), but it is rare for the same authors to recognize that the difference in credit use may be attributable to differential property rights.

In Saudi Arabia, the women can’t expand into international markets as easily as men can because of restrictions on their travel. Many of us are aware that women from conservative Muslim countries cannot go abroad on their own,
but the business implications of such restrictions are seldom recognized in entrepreneurship program or research design.

In UAE, financial access differed greatly by gender: 66% of the female entrepreneurs did not have active bank credit. These differences in financial access would necessarily have impact on the outcomes for women as business owners.

From these examples, we can see not only the importance of variations in national practice for women’s performance as entrepreneurs, but we can also see how the broad backdrop of gender norms may be a powerful impediment to successful business-building by women, regardless of what interventions may be mounted. Insisting on viewing business as a “neutral” endeavor, as many do, only makes important influences on outcomes invisible.

Reaching the Poor

An unfortunate outcome of the tie that has been made between women’s entrepreneurship and poverty alleviation is that two are often equated rhetorically with little basis in actual practice. Some programs directly claim to be focused on helping the poor—and may actually be doing so. Others, however, imply by the imagery they use in reports and on websites that they are engaged with poverty, especially among remote rural populations, when in fact they do not serve the poor. Some well-intentioned people actually believe they are reaching the poor when their program design in truth has made that impossible.

One reason for this conceptual blind spot is that few people in the developed world have experience with remote rural locations. Only 26% of the European Union’s population lives in rural areas, according to the World Bank Databank’s 2012 statistics; 17% of US citizens live in rural areas, according to the same source. In contrast, consider that 70% of the world’s poor live in rural areas. Indeed, 71% of the populations in the least developed nations are rural. As a consequence of this major disconnect in experience, people in the developed countries have a hard time even imagining that there are places left in the world where there are no roads, no electricity, no plumbing, and no media. So they design interventions that assume all these exist.

Women working in extremely impoverished circumstances, especially in remote rural areas, are substantially constrained by material scarcity and limited mobility. Where I have been working in Uganda, for instance, there is no electricity and the water is not clean enough to drink. Transportation out of the village is limited and expensive. There is no bank and no post office. Between gathering wood and caring for children, the women make a little money growing and selling small garden crops of a limited range of agricultural commodities. They sell this produce through truckers who drive an eroded dirt road to the largest town in the area. The drivers gouge them
mercilessly for this service, cutting into profit margins drastically. The inexorable fluctuation in commodity prices makes their income hopelessly unstable. Other than one or two female teachers, there is no formal employment.

Many popular ideas for innovative interventions would be pointless, even counterproductive, in this site. Even if these women had mobile phones and the electricity to charge them, for instance, it would do no good to check prices around the region because they have no choices about where their produce goes. The nearest bank is two hours away and the numeracy in the group so limited that reading statements would be impossible. In this part of Uganda, like so many similar communities around the world, females seldom achieve more than a few years of primary schooling. For this reason, the microfinance groups that have been promoted by government and NGOs in the region worry me. Financial literacy is extremely limited in this population yet the schemes are invariably complex. Some members who are better able to understand the terms gain at the expense of their less skilled friends, who, out of need and confusion, fall into credit spirals.

In the table below, I have shown the percent of females enrolled in secondary school among a list of Sub-Saharan African countries. The average for the region is 37%. For comparison, consider that female secondary school enrollment for North American or European Union countries is more or less 100%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary School Enrollment, Females</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(% of Total Females, 2010-2012, latest data)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benin 13 Lesotho 37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Botswana 66 Madagascar 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso 17 Malawi 29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burundi 17 Mauritius 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameroon 39 Mozambique 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cote d'Ivoire 14 Namibia 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia 11 Nigeria 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambia, The 56 Senegal 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana 44 Uganda 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya 48</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(End of Table)

Even knowledge of farming is confined to a small set of fruits and vegetables, so they all compete to sell the same outputs at the same time. New practices or crops seem risky in a setting where the food supply is precarious as it is. If they wanted to add value to their produce by making chutneys or sauces or jams, the women I know would be unable to do so. The stoves consist of three stones surrounding an open fire, so they can't control heat well. Beyond onions, ginger, and garlic, there are no spices or condiments to create taste variations. There is no way to sterilize a jar. There are no jars.
In sum, the economic eco-system substantially constrains what is possible for these women to achieve, even if they had the imagination, skills, and capital to innovate. Because such circumstances prevail in rural parts of developing countries, programs such as Jita and Avon are far more effective in helping the women who live there than microfinance or training alone.

Avon and Jita, as well as similar systems such as Living Goods, provide a basket of novel, fast-moving products for the women to sell, along with training and assistance with logistics. Particularly in the Jita system, the products offered are selected, priced, and sized with an eye to the tastes and buying power of the local market. While the novelty of the goods presents a differentiation feature that is very important, the sustainability of the income is really the key. Because a variety of objects is offered and the pricing is stable, the seller can produce a steady revenue stream, as compared to traditional produce. Importantly, such systems are vastly preferable to the all-too-frequent scheme in which a large, expensive, but “good for the poor” durable item is sold in on a one-time only basis. That’s because the consumables are repeat-purchase items, are light and easy to carry, while the durables are heavy and, once sold into the community, produce no more income. Schemes intending to sell, for instance, cookstoves, should be designed so that the women can make money off the sale of support objects, such as fuel refills, or the effort will merely be exploitative.

Loans, in the absence of a viable opportunity for investment, make no difference. In our last field trip to Bangladesh, we were surprised to see that many women’s microloans were going to buy plane tickets to Saudi Arabia for husbands who might never return, but would send remittances. While there is some logic in looking at a foreign worker as a capital investment, we don’t think this is the kind of entrepreneurial opportunity that most who promote microlending have in mind. However, for a community of women who are often not even allowed to leave their compound, the available investments are all small and agricultural—raising animals, planting gardens—and thus subject to the same vicissitudes that have produced the poverty in the first place. Where else, exactly, is that capital to go?

To get to the communities where my colleagues and I work, it takes many hours of driving, often off the road. Thus, the sheer challenge of distance is one that we attend to very carefully when planning projects—it is the main cost element and time on the road nearly always dictates time in the field. These distances and the restraints typically placed on women’s mobility have a massive impact on the delivery of programs or services. It is difficult even to communicate the availability of such offerings to areas so far removed. I have seen program planners’ failure to consider mobility and distance result in a very limited sphere of impact. If we intend to reach the poor, we must reach.
In my work with Vodafone and the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, I have learned how large the gender gap is for ICT access in developing countries. In some regions, the gap is as much as 40%. The material concerns of energy, signal, and device affordability are one barrier. But sometimes the other barrier—the household power dynamic that says a man should freely access the internet, while it is not necessary (or appropriate) for a woman to do the same—is harder to cross.

Internet Access by Gender for Developing Regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access by gender</th>
<th>East Asia and Pacific</th>
<th>South Asia</th>
<th>Sub-Saharan Africa</th>
<th>Europe and Central Asia</th>
<th>Latin American and the Caribbean</th>
<th>Middle East and North Africa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women's and girls' internet access level</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men's and boys' internet access level</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender gap (weighted)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on data from 144 developing countries. Source: Women and the Web (2012), Intel, Dahlberg, and Globescan.

Now that I have described some of these challenges, I hope other program design limitations will become clear. Any program that is delivered through an object that requires electricity, let alone internet, will be severely limited in reach. Indeed, if the means of communication require literacy or English, many in the desired audience effectively will not have access to the content. A program offered in an urban area will not reach rural women because they will not be able to get there. A program that is restricted to those with more than a high school education is necessarily addressing an elite.

Using a Gender Lens

The relative constraints on women’s mobility and information access, as compared to men’s, are just two of many gender-specific circumstances that need to be accommodated when planning or evaluating an intervention or investment on behalf of female entrepreneurs. It is crucial for anyone hoping to empower women and girls that they learn to look with a gender lens at phenomena they are accustomed to treating as “neutral” or even “just basic business.” Similarly, they must learn to realize that some issues not normally thought to be business-related—such as reproductive rights and domestic violence—are real constraints for entrepreneurs.

The most potentially damaging gender issue for any intervention is violence. While many in the West think of violence as something unrelated to business...
or as an accidental or exogenous factor, those who have been active in the
women’s entrepreneurship space for a longer time have learned— the hard
way— to think differently.

Beginning with reports of increased domestic attacks against the early
microlending groups in Bangladesh, the patterned response of violence
whenever women are given a helping hand toward economic autonomy has
become a matter for constant vigilance. All economic interventions on behalf
of women should consider the potential for violence: attacks are not ancillary
to gender inequality, but the instrumental means by which systematic
disadvantage is held in place. Violence is an implicit, if not explicit, presence
in women’s lives all over the world, but it is particularly likely to emerge when
the local norms of feminine submission are threatened. Consider, for
instance, the number of Indian spokespeople who offered, in the wake of the
bus rape incident of December 2012, that women had been advancing too
rapidly as an excuse and explanation for the epidemic of rape.

Our team has seen such reactions on a smaller scale in nearly every field site.
We have seen Avon reps and Jita entrepreneurs, when traveling from one
customer’s home to another, gang raped or robbed. These were not random
incidents but men who were lying in wait. We have seen CARE help a
woman set up a stall in the local market, only to have the men of the village
burn it down when the community activists left. Female owners of medium
sized businesses in China tell me their biggest problem is bankers’ insistence
on a custom of long boozy evenings as a necessary prelude to credit—they
are afraid such circumstances are dangerous and would rather borrow from
family or friends instead. The prevalence of sexual attack is a daily reality for
the millions of women who run small businesses on roadsides and in cities
everywhere.

Globally, 40% of female homicides are committed by intimate partners;
domestic violence is a huge problem everywhere. However, few realize that
financial abuse is typically an accompaniment to—and enforcement tool for—
itimate partner violence. Predatory partners will do everything from running
up credit card debt to forcibly extorting a paycheck in order to maintain terror
and control. This behavior is so common that investors who wish to measure
the impact of their programs on female entrepreneurs should always include
questions about control over earnings in order to capture a potentially
disruptive variable occurring between the moment income is earned and any
desired financial outcome (hiring, saving, purchase of capital equipment).

Even in happy families, the women often do not have control over the financial
assets, whether at home or in business. If you are evaluating a woman’s
need to be in a training or capital program, two common pitfalls should be
avoided. The first is to ensure that the woman is really the owner. It is
common for husbands to set up their wives to apply for assistance programs.
New programs that certify women’s ownership will be a crucial tool for investors going forward. The second pitfall occurs when assessors conclude that a woman is wealthy because of her family assets when in truth she may have no access to or control over any source of capital other than a little jewelry. Such women can be unfairly rejected because they are “too rich.”

I am often amazed by Western inattention to gender barriers blocking credit, contracts, and ownership. There are still many places in the developing world where women simply do not have the right to own capital, inherit wealth, or enter into formal financial transactions on their own. Even in countries where women can legally own property or have a bank account or whatever, the local tribal laws or religious customs forbid female involvement in such matters, especially wives. These local “laws” are very often enforced with threats or acts of violence. Women who resist exercising access to credit in such circumstances have very good reasons and should not be dismissed as “lacking confidence.”

Bride burnings, human trafficking, early marriage, and a number of other cruelties are often passed over and dismissed as “cultural” factors by business analysts. I think these phenomena are better understood as economic issues. Indeed, my opinion is that one of the most powerful promises of women’s entrepreneurship is the potential to do away with such practices. If we can give economic standing to women in cultures where their value is now seen only in terms of what their bodies will bring in trade, these crimes might disappear. Marriage, in such societies, is not a romantic dream, but a hard financial reckoning in which the young woman’s only means to live is by marrying when and whom her father chooses. Teen girls have value in trade and as markers of debt in many poor communities—they are liquidated as assets the same as a cow or a goat might be. My view is that the only way such practices will be stopped is to ensure that the perception of a girl’s future value as an entrepreneur or worker is greater than the price she might bring today.
Reproductive rights are also usually seen as unrelated to business matters—even though, all over the world, the single biggest drag on growth for female owners is family obligation. Wealthy female entrepreneurs in China have told me how these issues constrain the time they can give to their businesses. I have observed the same phenomenon among rural women in sub-Saharan Africa, literally weighed down with small children, try to earn a living. In evaluating the outcomes of interventions, I have seen that the most frequent reason for shutting down or pulling back a business is a small child or a sick relative. A well-written business plan may crumble into dust in the face of an unwanted pregnancy.

Usually, people treat the time constraints produced by family obligations as personal choices or “natural” inclinations. While I would not argue that care for others, especially children, is a central priority for most women, I find that the women in my fieldwork frame care as a burden that is foisted upon them by society—especially by in-laws—rather than a choice freely made. If we were to reframe this issue as a “burden of unpaid work,” rather than in the more sentimental terms of “family and child care,” I think we would come closer to seeing the unfairness of the situation and we would calculate its effects more dispassionately. Women do more unpaid work than men in every country on the planet; this disproportionate allocation of labor is a key feature of the gender system. Women’s economic opportunity and the burdens of
reproduction are closely related—we need to work that understanding into our practices.

**Governments and Corporations**

An interesting feature of the recent interest in women’s entrepreneurship has been the entry of major multinationals into offering training programs, expanding access to markets, and instituting financial facilities. Though many observers are skeptical of such programs, I feel there are advantages to be gained working through multinationals.

First, there is potential to achieve scale. For instance, the Coca-Cola 5 by 20 program or the Walmart Empowering Women Together program, both of which work by bringing female entrepreneurs into a global supply chain, promise to integrate large numbers of women into the international marketplace much more quickly than working up from small, individual efforts.

Second, there is the potential to transfer the global gender ethos through an unexpected mechanism. Governments vary a great deal in their attitudes toward gender equality as a national priority. Local attitudes are often much more negative toward women than the global-level imperative to closing the gender gap would suggest.

The nations where women need the most help are those with the most gender-unfriendly governments. In the map below, the governments in least compliance with the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) are the dark green areas: Niger, Chad, DR Congo, Angola, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Papua New Guinea, Myanmar, and North Korea. With exceptions, these countries represent conflict zones, dictatorships, and rogue states, another point of proof in the larger argument that greater equality for women correlates with better lives for all.

Even contrary governments are sometimes quite happy to have multinationals investing in their economies. Other governments want to improve their gender situation, but are under-resourced or lack expertise. Thus, the potential for a multinational to come in with support could make all the difference.
Thirdly, there is the potential opening to build a supportive international infrastructure. Goldman Sachs and the IFC recently announced an international financial facility meant to give women-owned SMEs better access to capital. These institutions will be working with banks, as well as with entrepreneurs, in order to overcome local impediments. Thus, the effort will build an infrastructure that can operate at a level above nation-level constraints, such as tribal councils ignoring formal statutes.

Facing the Contradictions

Some of the skepticism toward corporate investment in entrepreneurship for women stems from their treatment of women employees internally. The 100 biggest employers in 30 countries were surveyed by the World Economic Forum in 2010: results showed that women were not advancing and were not paid equally for the same work, but companies seldom monitored equality of employment terms or set targets for improvement. To the extent that major employers are engaging in unequal practices in the workplace at home, but trying to stimulate women’s economic empowerment abroad, there is certainly a question to be asked about motives and perspectives.

I have heard it argued—by people leading multinational programs in women’s entrepreneurship—that investing in women’s entrepreneurship is a better route to empowerment because the formal sector so seldom accommodates them. There is merit to that argument. Still, I cannot help but wonder how much the emphasis on building women’s business is an attempt—by employers and by governments—to take attention away from the much larger problem of women in employment.

Doing Research
When I first came into the academic discourse on women’s entrepreneurship, I was shocked to discover that the literature:

- cast the gender differences in entrepreneurship performance as a function of psychological self-perceptions
- showed an extraordinary lack of attention to the concrete gender system constraints I have outlined here
- had only studied the developing nations in a few instances, almost never with a large sample, and virtually always using an elite set of respondents
- had never investigated the role of multinational institutions, whether corporations or NGOs, despite the prevalence of these players on the global scene.

Large databases, such as the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, use such small sample sizes in poor areas that there is simply no point in looking at those reports for guidance for the kinds of interventions described in this essay. Further, the questions they ask are driven by rich nation academic concerns and concepts, such as queries about the social status of entrepreneurs and the degree to which media reinforces gender stereotypes. In places where there are no formal jobs and no media, these questions are irrelevant. There is a long way to go before the academic literature engages meaningfully in the effort to promote women’s entrepreneurship in developing nations, especially among the rural poor.

When we design studies to evaluate practical programs, we must be careful to capture contributory factors that may impede progress, as well as to look for outcomes that may be related to the overall objectives I outlined in the early sections of this essay, but not to business performance. For instance, women often have trouble keeping their business money separate from the household budget. They may take earnings from the business and pay a child’s tuition rather than buying a new machine for production. While the business may not grow as a result, the larger objective of building human capital would be served. On the other hand, it is also very common that women turn over money to their husbands, sometimes under force. The difficulty women have retaining control over wealth crops up frequently, all around the world. Thus, evaluating the success of a women’s entrepreneurship program should not be restricted to statements of business condition—sales, profit, growth—but should include some means to capture what happened to earnings.

There many ways in which gender practices can affect the outcomes of an effort to support women-owned businesses, as we have seen. I am sure I have not anticipated all of them. The point here is that the community behind women’s entrepreneurship needs to adopt an overall mindset that includes a sophisticated and informed approach to capturing the influence of gender on their successes and failures.
Conclusion

The objectives of the movement to support women’s entrepreneurship are historic and lofty. The backing of many individuals and institutions from across the sectoral board, as well as the magnitude of resources that have been brought to bear, are testimony to the enormous potential to create good and alleviate harm that lies in economic autonomy for women. This movement has learned and achieved a great deal already, in my opinion. By adopting a more purposeful approach to the gender limitations, I believe we will do even more.