BEHIND AID RELATIONS: HOW DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS INFLUENCE PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN BENEFICIARIES ON EMPOWERMENT (A CASE STUDY OF RCL PROJECT OF OXFAM IN SOUTH SULAWESI PROVINCE, INDONESIA)

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Abstract

Foreign aid has the nature of 'elegant power', which enables donors' intervention. This paper argues that this nature and development interventions have influenced perceptions of women beneficiaries on empowerment. Efforts to empower women have been conducted with various approaches. However, not much has been said about how development projects influence women beneficiaries' perceptions on empowerment, including limited awareness on empowerment due to the approach of development project and dependence on external intervention. The paper looks at a case study on Restoring Coastal Livelihoods (RCL) Project of Oxfam (2010-2015) in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The research applied qualitative research techniques using semi-structured interviews and document reviews in the project area, and participant observation in Pangkajene Kepulauan District, one of the four districts covered under the project. The

institutional ethnographic analysis in this research reveals that women beneficiaries perceive empowerment mostly based on their experiences in the project. However, the degree of empowerment is relative to types of women's engagement in public spheres, men and women understanding of gender relations and equality, and nature of activities. The paper further argues that efforts to empower women tend to rely on external intervention to facilitate the process and to deal with existing dynamics of power relations. Finally, the paper underlines that empowerment depends highly on women's personal knowledge, critical awareness, choice, willingness, and commitment. This research is crucial to contribute to gender and development studies as it highlights the multidimensional and multilayered aspect of aid relations and women's empowerment.

Keywords

Women, Empowerment, Perceptions, Development, Aid Relations, Interventions, Power, Gender, Projects

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, women's issues have been included and promoted as one of the main issues to tackle as part of concerted international efforts in poverty alleviation. One of the most prominent women's issues is women's empowerment. Empowerment itself has been heavily used in development intervention as a way to increase public awareness and promote public participation in the policy processes (Burnell, 2008; Connel, 1999; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Friedmann, 1992; Rowlands, 1999). Furthermore, the insertion of gender agenda in international aid has its origins to the increasing non-conventional security threats after the Cold War, which have called global attention for poverty alleviation (Burnell, 2008, 506). The inclusion of women's issues in international aid agenda was also related to the internationalization of women's equality agenda in development projects, such as through the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985) (Connel, 1999; Rowand-Campbell, 1999). Feminists believe by making women visible in democratization processes, democracy can be inclusive and complete. This can be done through social mobilization of women and men in dealing with issues in public spheres (Esteva & Prakash, 1998; Rai, 2008). As suggested by feminist writers, it is important to consider women's voices and experiences to understand the contexts of gender issues. In this

case, there is a crucial need to see gender issues in a bigger context, by relating existing problems faced by women with their surrounding conditions, including social structures, which affect roles and relations between men and women in the society.

For this reason, it is important to note that development intervention projects and implementers need to consider the contexts and relevant stakeholders where the projects take place (Ottaway, 2003). Existing literature by post-colonial and feminist work on empowerment, such as Ammy Allen (1998, in Koggel, 2008) on power relations and Naila Kabeer (1999) and Dan Connel (1999) on empowerment, tend to perceive women's position in collective groups and do not explore much on how empowerment, both in individual and collective contexts relate to wider context, particularly when dealing with the aid industry, thus positioning women not merely as objects of the projects. In short, there is still a lack of studies on specific relations which elaborate relational and multidimensional aspects of power relations under the aid industry between women beneficiaries, donors, and executing agencies, and other stakeholders, such as the local government, particularly in Indonesia's context. These concerns constituted the rationale for this paper, which examined Oxfam's Restoring Coastal Livelihoods (RCL) project in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Recalling the fact that empowerment is culturally and socially contextualized, South Sulawesi with four ethnic groups (Bugis et al.,) and diverse languages provides a good context for the topic of this study. Furthermore, the RCL project was selected because it covered variety of issues, not only environmental and economic sustainability of the local people living in the project area, but also women's empowerment in economic, social, political, and environmental dimensions. This also shows the gender mainstreaming aspect of the project. This paper explores the topic and provides the findings and analysis based on the research, which was conducted from April 2015 to November 2015.

2. Research Objectives

The principal objective of the research is to investigate to what extent, development project influences women beneficiaries' perceptions on empowerment. In order to answer the main question, the research approached the topic by exploring the following objectives as follows:

- To investigate women beneficiaries' position in the project framework.

- To explore perceptions of women beneficiaries on empowerment after their involvement in the project.

3. Research Methodology

This research is based on a constructivist paradigm, which underlines that realities are constructed socially and assumes the transactional/subjectivist nature of knowledge (Grbich, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Habermas, 1978 as cited by Murray & Overton, 2014, 22). Constructivism also concerns human agency because of the nature of human beings as social beings (Graham, 2005, 19). For this reason, the research applied participant observation and institutional ethnography approach with social network analysis on the research findings to understand the narratives from research participants on their everyday life (Kitzinger, 2004; Grbich, 2007, 124; Neuman, 2012, 291, 361; Wogan, 2004 as cited by Crang & Cook, 2007, 37). The researcher collected the data by conducting semi-structured interviews, with purposive sampling method, and participant observation (Mikkelsen, 1995; Stern, 2011; Brinkmann, 2012; Murray & Overton, 2014). The interviews involved 26 women beneficiaries, 2 men beneficiaries, 2 women non-beneficiaries, 3 men non-beneficiaries, 2 village leaders, and 3 representatives from Oxfam in Indonesia, 2 project officers from Oxfam's local partners for RCL project, 4 representatives from the national government, 1 representative from the provincial government, 1 representative from the district government, 1 woman activist, and 1 anthropologist.

The RCL Project of Oxfam was used as the central case study in this research to provide in-depth findings, understanding, and analysis on the research topic (Neuman, 2012; Vogt, Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2014). The ethnography research only focused in one district, where two villages were observed (Pitusunggu & Pitue). It is also the limitation of this research. The researcher observed one economic group in each village and interviewed women beneficiaries in each group (including the leader of groups).

4. Research Findings

The research found that women have their own ways in expressing empowerment and being empowered through their involvement in the RCL Project. Development intervention from Oxfam has given them positive impact especially in building confidence to speak up, and participate in public spheres as they have gained knowledge and skills, not to mention earned

their own income to support the family. Women's contribution in the household's economy also makes the men more willing to support women's activities outside the house. Some of them were also willing to help women taking care of the children, feeding the ducks, and cooking when the women were away. In short, the project has brought economic-driven gender awareness, which is based mostly on practical needs. On the other hand, the project has also increased women strategic awareness and community awareness of the needs to have inclusive and participatory decision-making processes by involving women and understanding their unique needs. This is also in line with argument of the feminists, such as Naila Kabeer (1999) who argues that structures define other dimensions of empowerment, namely individual resources, agency and achievements. However, feminists also argue that providing credit access to women and promoting women's political participation are not likely to be automatically empowering in them. Nevertheless, they do create the opportunities, which enable trans formatters consciousness to practice on the field (Kabeer, 1999; Walter, 2010). This also can be seen in the contexts of the RCL project, which have created gender awareness and promoted women's participation in policy processes by increasing women's confidence as they involved in economic group activities, coastal women's forum, community forums, and development planning meetings in their area. In this case, both strategic and practical needs reveal as the output of development intervention.

However, it is worth to note that the degree of empowerment is relative to women's engagement, such as in relation to the types of participation, nature of economic activities and understanding of gender relations and equality. For example, in activities such as snacks' production, men were not involved. However, men participated in activities such as organic farming, which is in line with their everyday activities. In addition, although women were allowed to join groups' activities and public meetings, they still have to consider that they have completed domestic tasks before participating in groups' activities. Therefore, in order to understand perception of women beneficiaries on empowerment, it is crucial to understand women beneficiaries' position in the project design. It is also substantial to further explore women beneficiaries' voice on questions, such as how they interpret being empowered as women and how they perceive themselves empowered through the project.

4.1. The Component of Women's Empowerment in the RCL Project Design

The RCL project was initiated mainly to promote community resilience in the coastal area. Oxfam itself has a commitment to put women at the heart of all of its activities. Women's empowerment was incorporated in this project recalling the fact that women counted as the majority of the members of the villages within the project area. Based on the project information, the RCL was a five-year project (2010-2015) conducted in the west coast of South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. The Government of Canada through Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) funded 90 percent of the project. Oxfam Eastern Indonesia office in Makassar, South Sulawesi, administratively managed the project and the Economic Justice Division of Oxfam GB Indonesia supervised the project. Oxfam involved three local non-governmental organizations (NGOs): Mangrove Action Project (MAP), *Yayasan Konservasi Laut* (YKL) or Marine Conservation Foundation, and Lembaga Maritim Nusantara (Archipelago Maritime Institute). The project promoted sustainable economic growth by working with local communities and local partners to increase family incomes by making use of renewable natural resources. Therefore, it is fair to say that the project was not exactly a women's empowerment project. However, recalling the fact that women were the ones who experience fragile conditions in the coastal area, women had become the main beneficiaries of the project and one component in this project. Such design was possible due to the flexibility from CIDA to let Oxfam to design and undertake the project (Interview with Dini Widiastuti, Economic Justice Program Director of Oxfam GB Indonesia Office, and 20 August 2015). Oxfam also started the project by conducting baseline study with gender analysis to have clear portrait about the contexts of the project area and the needs of the beneficiaries. In the RCL project proposal, Oxfam also mentioned about promoting women's participation and leadership in the community, gender analyses, gender training, and research on women's access to land to show gender concerns.

Although in the early years of the project women beneficiaries admitted that they only followed the logics of the projects, but when they gradually became well informed, skilful, and confident, they turned to become active and critical stakeholders in the project and active citizens in their community whether as individuals and groups. They were not afraid in attending public events, participating in development planning meetings or village meetings, speaking up their concerns about their needs representing women and wider community, sharing their knowledge

and cooperating with other women, et cetera. These conditions were also possible, as Oxfam through the RCL project has bridged the people, especially women beneficiaries with the local authority. In short, women beneficiaries have become confident as they participated in the project activities.

4.2 Perceptions of Women Beneficiaries on Empowerment

The research found that women beneficiaries have perceived empowerment differently. In Bugis language, empowerment can be interpreted similar as 'being able', which is "naulle", and it is "akkulle" in Makassar language. As a matter of fact, the culture of Bugis and Makassar have history about women being kings of kingdoms in ancient period, such as in Tanete, Luwu, Gowa, Barru, Bone, and Mamuru Kingdoms. For example, in Tanete Kingdom's history, there were 20 kings, 9 out of the 20 kings were women. In short, women had significant and important positions in the past. They had the power to make decisions including in wartime and marriage, to express their feelings out loud according to their willingness just like men (Sulston, 2011, 120-26). However, after the Makassar War (1669) and the interpretation of the importance to uphold *siri* (dignity), the culture was interpreted in masculine way by positioning women in the house to protect them from the enemy (Interview with Dr. Halilintar Latief, Anthropologist at State University of Makassar, 19 September 2015). On the other hand, the research found that women beneficiaries did not see culture a big hindrance for women's participation in the project activities, as long as they brought benefits to the family, the husbands gave their support and permission willingly.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that culture has been part of their everyday life that they have taken as granted and normal. For example, husband is the head of the family, thus the sole breadwinner, which leaves the wife's obligation to stay at home and taking care of the family; no need for women to go to higher education because they will soon be married and end up in kitchen as the husbands will take care of them (Bedford & Rai, 2010; Friedmann, 1992; Rowlands, 2002). Culture, which has been rooted in everyday life, makes it difficult for women to be empowered as the culture has been institutionalized in other aspect of life, such as social, politics, and economy. The culture, which highly upheld and honoured women's roles and positions in the past has been interpreted and practised in a way that undermining gender equality, belittling women in various aspects of life, domesticating women and limiting women's

participation.

"Daughters are not seen necessary to continue to higher education because in the end they will end up getting married (taken care by their husbands) and work in the kitchen." Nurhayati, Community Organizer of Tamanlanrea Group, Tackler District.

Social and cultural aspects, which have been part of women's everyday life have influenced how they perceive empowerment. Knowing words of *naulle* and *akkulle* or even having the progressive culture on gender relations in the Bugis-Makassar history does not necessarily mean that the women understand that as gender relations. The practices of culture have been taken for granted, for example on responsibilities between husband and wife in the household. On the other hand, there are also other women whom are in different positions from most women in the coastal area. For example, they have higher education, such as up to bachelor degree; they are parts of the village government such as in the village-owned enterprise and the cadre for village government or health service centre; community facilitators, teachers, et cetera. These women are more used to being involved and active in activities in the community. Nevertheless, just like other coastal women, they are also not familiar with the concepts of empowerment, gender equality, organizational management, public speaking, participation, and so on so forth until Oxfam came with the RCL project in 2010.

4.3 Influence of Development Intervention on Perceptions of Women Beneficiaries on Empowerment

The RCL project has introduced women beneficiaries to development concepts, such as empowerment, capacity building, participation, gender equality, governance, et cetera. As a matter of fact, Oxfam has initiated the project with a literacy program, which was not in the list of the project activities but relevant to the needs of women beneficiaries (Interview with Tua Hutabarat, RCL Project Officer, 1 June 2015).

"By joining the activities, especially the literacy program, I can write and read. I also know how to write signature so that I can get my children's rapport from the school." Jamilah, Member of *Anggrek* Group, Maros District.

In addition, women beneficiaries share similar understanding about being empowered as they participated in gender trainings. For example, empowerment is about self-confidence, knowledgeable, well-informed, mobility, ability to write, read, and speak up in front of public,

participation in the policy processes and being taken into account in decision making process, increasing skills, playing various roles in the community, and working in groups to create income-generating activities. In relation to the RCL project, women beneficiaries expressed economic empowerment as the main stepping-stone to empower them both individually and collectively. Most beneficiaries stated that they have the rights to speak up in the family and in the village meetings as they now are productive, capable to contribute to the family needs (Interview with Sitting Ramah, Leader of *Pita Akin* Group, Pangkep District, and 22 June 2015). They are also free to keep and spend the money they earn. There has been strong understanding of the beneficiaries in affiliating increase in income as the main gate of opportunity to increase their gender awareness and to improve their gender relations with others in the community.

Therefore, it can be seen that empowermant has personal, collective, and relational aspects, especially in considering how other members of the community perceive roles and positions of women. In this case, it is important to link individual woman's social, psychological and political empowerment to collective action with other women through social network and organization to promote social transformation (Connel, 1999; Friedmann, 1992; Sen & Grown, 1987, Batliwala, 1994, Kabeer, 1994, as cited by Parpart, 2008). For example, after involvement of women beneficiaries in the project, there have been positive responses and appreciation from men (husbands, village leaders, local government agencies) and wider community, including family members in seeing women's participation.

"In the past, we only knew the village leader but we were never invited to village meetings. After we got assistance from RCL and have knowledge, we could meet head of sub-district directly and voice our concerns." Nurhayati, Community Organizer of Tamanlanrea Group, Tackler District.

On the other hand, being empowered is also seen by the executing agencies of the RCL project. For example, women beneficiaries might have different perceptions on being empowered by saying that they are not burdened at all by the project activities. However, from Oxfam's livelihood and gender relations' considerations, that might not be the case, because the women have additional burdens to deal with. The level of engagement and power relations experienced by these women also become influencing factors towards women's empowerment (Interview with Jaya Tulha, Acting Project Manager of the RCL Project, 29 July 2015). Women

beneficiaries still have to deal with domestic chores. In addition, it is not easy to promote gender equality and to apply that to wider community due to rooted cultural factor (Interview with Nurhalimah, Treasurer of *Assyura* Group, Pangkep District, & 5 June 2015). However, after Oxfam's RCL project intervention, women beneficiaries learned new things, not only about cultivating seaweeds, organic vegetables, working on mangroves and fishpond, making cookies and handicrafts, making organic composts as fertilizers, making fishnet, and crab trap. They also learned about importance of having awareness on gender relations. They learned how to speak up for their rights and participate in policy processes, by engaging in collective activities, such as economic groups and coastal women's forum. The research also found that both men and women beneficiaries agree strongly that Oxfam has increased their social awareness, belonging, solidarity as a community through the project. For example, Coastal Women's Forum was created not only to discuss women's needs, but also the villagers as a whole, such as on clean water, proper toilets, early childhood education schools, and small docks in Kankakee Island, one of the project area. The reality of strengthening social ties and solidarity has been experienced and confirmed by other groups such as in Mandalle Sub-district and Ma'rang Sub-district in Pangkep District. They feel that the income-generating nature of the groups with the social contract to make revolving in-kind have helped them personally to earn additional income to survive their daily life as well as to help those in need in the community.

In this case, Syarifah, leader of *Siangkalingadae* and *Kalaroang* groups, said that she made the decision to revolve the assets and to use the money of the groups based on deliberation with the members of the groups. In short, empowerment is understood as independent ability to discuss, define, and decide the usage of the assets owned individually and collectively. Interestingly, this perception on empowerment does not necessarily match with the project's plan, which envisioned that the created economic groups will experience and reach higher stage of economic ladder, such as entrepreneurship. This happens because the beneficiaries tend to prioritise the assets for urgent, daily, and social needs rather than as investment to expand their business.

5. Understanding Perceptions of Women Beneficiaries on Empowerment

Based on the findings of the research, it can be concluded that the RCL project has

various impacts on women beneficiaries, particularly on their perceptions on empowerment. In this case, the perceptions must be seen and understood in a big and comprehensive picture from various actors related with the project, directly or indirectly. As feminists argue, empowerment has relational and multidimensional aspects (Luttrell et al., 2009). Furthermore, empowerment and being empowered are closely connected to personal and personality aspects of the beneficiaries. The relational aspect of empowerment can be seen by considering intersectionality of existing various actors and interests related to the development project, thus existing contexts and dynamics of aid relations (Cho et al., 2013), which women beneficiaries experienced their relations with Oxfam and the local partners, as well as the local government. Intersectionality also takes place amongst women beneficiaries, where the leaders were dominant and often invited to events on behalf of the groups, whereas the members tended to rely on the existence of their leaders to participate in public in the events and to represent their concerns. In relation to that, perceptions of women beneficiaries on empowerment also depend on their positions and roles in the project. For example, in each group, the common organisational structure consists of leader, secretary and treasurer. They were elected based on group's consensus. They might hold the same positions due to trust amongst members when no particular conflict happens, and based on Oxfam's approach to particular individuals to mobilize the groups. Recalling different economic, education, and social background, these women have different level of awareness, knowledge, understanding in perceiving and expressing empowerment and being empowered. The findings also show that trust and delegation of positions and responsibilities have become an important way to empower women. Moreover, empowerment and being empowered although expressed in optimistic and positive terms by beneficiaries are actually experienced differently by different members due to its relational and multidimensional aspects.

These findings also highlights the importance of contexts in the project area prior to and during project implementation, such as histories, cultures, religions, local politics, and so on, which influence women's experiences and participation in public arena (Friedmann, 1992; Golub, 2002 as cited by Ottaway & Carothers, 2000; Grabe, 2012; Nussbaum, 2000; Rai, 2008; Rowand-Campbell, 1999). This is very important so that development interventions can create enabling factors for women's empowerment and participation.

6. Conclusion

The research findings show that foreign aid through development interventions (designs et al.,) has influenced significantly women beneficiaries' perceptions on empowerment. In addition, the research highlights that the impact and sustainability of the positive outcome of development intervention ideally will start from the personality of women beneficiaries and depends on the knowledge, awareness, willingness, and commitment of the beneficiaries to continue what they have experienced and gained from the project. There is also need for beneficiaries, both the community and the government to invest their resources (tangible and intangible capital) to continue development efforts, which are inclusive, participatory, empowering, and sustainable.

Looking at the existing challenges, external support from development agencies is still needed recalling the fact of personal, relational, and multidimensional aspects of empowerment. However, continuing assistance should also mean introducing multidimensional aspect of empowerment in addition to economic empowerment, increasing capacity of beneficiaries in other activities (packaging, marketing, networking, et cetera), and facilitating wider opportunities for beneficiaries to expand their activities, to improve their bargaining power and positions, as well as to take the lead in the driver's seat in order to ensure effective entry and exit strategy and sustainability of the project's outcome. Such assistance will make development intervention effective, contextual, and relevant for the beneficiaries. This is very important in making development projects work in order to promote a meaningful and sustainable women's empowerment.

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