

## Targeting Disadvantaged Women – Advancing Women’s Empowerment through Library Entrepreneurship Workshops

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### Abstract:

*Barugo Leyte Region in the Philippines consists of a society where socio-cultural patriarchic values are still deeply rooted in Leyte behaviors and perceptions. Women, particularly in rural areas, lack choices and opportunities to improve their living standards and to play as economic agents with potential to contribute to local development. They are restricted by poverty, cultural stereotypes, and poor access to education and health care services. These strong socio-cultural restrictions perpetuate gender discriminations. However, women are aware of their potential and are stepping into improved livelihoods for the future through entrepreneurship facilitated by the rural library. Although the economy of Barugo Leyte is still strongly dependent on agriculture, land is not available to everyone, particularly the very poor families, and farm and livestock activities are no longer profitable enough to improve living standards in rural areas. Moreover, women are becoming freer from traditional burdens and are willing to work towards their economic independence. Therefore, the rural non-farm economy is growing hand in hand with women entrepreneurs committed to non-farm activities and thus, playing an important role in economic local development. It is widely recognized that the involvement in income-generating activities by means of female entrepreneurship is a valuable precondition for economic growth, household-level poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment. Nevertheless, given personal conditions and external environments, not all nonfarm women entrepreneurs are able to achieve the same extent of business success. Therefore, this research aims to get insight on what key factors are influencing the success of recently library started or strengthened ongoing microenterprises of rural women engaged in non-farm income generating activities, in Barugo Leyte, Philippines. Subsequently, the research aims to address the contribution of female entrepreneurship facilitated by rural libraries to women’s economic empowerment.*

**Keywords:** women empowerment, gender, community enterprise, library

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## **Introduction**

Women in the Philippines are an increasingly significant entrepreneurial force and strongly contributing to local, regional and national economy as they represent the majority of informal traders in most developing countries. However, women still remain the largest under-represented group in terms of visibility as entrepreneurs and micro-enterprises owners. Particularly in Visayas Region, the entrepreneurial process still mirrors several constraints and vulnerabilities that might confine to traditional patterns people willing to take the risk and invest on their own. The self-employment status and women in entrepreneurship have been growing in less developed economies, as a form of livelihood for women themselves and usually to help support their families. Nevertheless, the entrepreneurial process is exceptionally critical for rural women as they face deep embedded structural and socio-cultural constraints, such as female seclusion and gender segregation, which strongly limit women's abilities to lead prosperous and profitable businesses. Many studies have shown that rural women have limited access to household decision-making, physical and financial assets, they are overloaded with work and are generally restricted in terms of mobility. Additionally, women have insufficient skills and knowledge, thus being highly vulnerable to male dominance in any social sphere. Therefore, due to gender discrimination, women tend to be granted an inferior status over time in nearly every aspect of life. Given this background, in order to empower rural women to realize their full potential as independent economic actors in the non-farm sector, it seems relevant for the rural library to facilitate and to address the struggles faced by rural women and to understand the different needs that women in the private sector have along the entrepreneurial process. However, instead of looking exclusively at what is still preventing women from increasing income and expanding ongoing microenterprises, it is important to emphasize what kind of strengths have enabled women to achieve success and contribute to improved livelihoods across rural landscapes. For this purpose, a field research was conducted in Barugo, Leyte in order to get insight into opportunities, constraints and key factors influencing the success of microenterprises of rural women involved in non-farm sector, and to assess how rural library and female entrepreneurship contributes to women economic empowerment.

## **Women in Leyte**

Women comprise half of the Leyte population. Women, in particular in rural areas, lack choices and opportunities to improve their living standards. They are restricted by poverty, cultural stereotypes, and poor access to education and health care services. These strong socio-cultural restrictions perpetuate gender discriminations and their inferior status over time. Many women's rights still need to be recognized so one can reach the gaps of the Philippine law regarding gender equity. Considering women political participation, their access to meaningful political positions and policy level is very low as the data figures that women represent less than 1 per cent of the high-level decision-making positions, (CBS, 2012). Additionally, the increasingly numbers of external migration and internal displacements are bringing new forms of vulnerabilities, especially for women head of households. In order to overcome the gender biased scenario, the local government have adopted the rhetoric of women's participation, and introduced various gender-based initiatives, increased microfinance support systems, and created an opening for the introduction of gender policies and programs among many government bodies and NGOs in coordination with rural libraries.

## **Host Library – Barangay Reading Centers and American Shelf in Visayas Region**

American Shelf in Visayas Region is governmental organization, one of its projects is focused on child-centered community development (CCCD) approach that aims to bring children, families and communities active in their own development. Within the CCCD approach, American Shelf in Visayas together with the Barangay Reading Centers addresses five core topics affecting children in Leyte: (i) health and nutrition of the children and pregnant women, (ii) safe drinking water, environmental sanitation, good hygiene and living conditions, (iii) children's right to education, (iv) household economic security, and (v) prevent sexual abuse and discrimination to children, and promote their rights. In Barugo district, the program started in 2012. Presently, the Barugo Program Unit (PU) is working across 17 VDCs of northern, central and mid-southern part of the district. The library is engaged in the economic development of a large number of VDCs in Barugo by supporting female involvement in income generating activities in order to ensure greater economic security to poor households. Through two development initiatives, namely Women's Empowerment Entrepreneurship Project (WEEP) and the Girl Empowerment Entrepreneurship Project, the Barugo PU has been actively involved in contributing to achieve the general developmental goals of Barugo District. Therefore, the development purpose of the the Girl Empowerment Entrepreneurship Project is to strengthen the previous work (WEEP) in the field and to ensure that girls and young women have sufficient knowledge and skills to shape their own lives, particularly at both social and economic dimensions of their future. The main activities to be conducted mainly rely on strengthening young women's organization in self-reliant groups (under cooperatives' umbrella), providing life skill education to participants and, on promoting enterprise related training to disadvantaged women. Achieving financial sustainability is crucial for microfinance institutions, as it not only assures their existence but also guarantees financial services to the poor on an everlasting basis. For this reason, the library has been working together with several cooperatives, which through their implemented initiatives aim to strength institutional capacity of cooperatives to function independently and generate income to cover operations for the longer term making in the roscas community development.

### **Research Design**

This research took place from February to May 2013 in Barugo Leyte Region 8 of the Philippines. The field research was conducted in collaboration with Local Government Unit of Leyte. The research is a combination of the livelihood approach and the narrative of female entrepreneurship across the developing world, so one can better understand the context specific conditions under which rural non-farm women are able to become entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the empowerment concept is also part of the theoretical framework of this research in light of entrepreneurial activities that may potentially empower women to reshape their lives. Special focus is placed on women economic empowerment. The research area has been pinpointed in the rural area of the Barugo district and, in particular, Roscas village development committees (VDC) have been chosen to conduct the study on non-farm female entrepreneurship facilitated by rural libraries.

### **Economic independence of women**

Self-confidence is an important driver to achieve economic independence and recognition. On the other hand, self-esteem can be strengthened by improved respect within one's close surroundings and capability to freely make financial choices. One should look at two

dimensions of self confidence: (i) greater self-confidence due to entrepreneurial activities; and, (ii) improved self-confidence as a result of economic independence. Firstly, all women have experienced positive transformations in their self-confidence thanks to business in the sense that they are the only or main person responsible for that specific activity and respective managerial tasks; women no longer feel worthless. Additionally, since women have to interact with suppliers and customers they become more confident and less shy. Other relational dimension perceived by respondents is one of increased skills. For example, women respondents know about bookkeeping and how to make calculations, being all of women self-employed in rosca shops. In this sense, because women have now more knowledge than before they feel more confident and respected among both households and the Barago community. Considering the role of business library workshops in influencing one's empowerment, it was commonly emphasized that women are empowered when comparisons to other occupations as housewife or farming activities are drawn. Women feel more empowered now not only because they have money to spend in social and religious events but mainly because they consider themselves freer to interact with the society. Whether women were able to increase business profits over time or not, the fieldwork and the study shows that all these women entrepreneurs are satisfied with their economic status and realize that non-farm businesses from the library facilitated workshops have also the potential beyond its economic dimension; it is an opportunity to learn more and “to *have other perception about world and life*”, (statement of a women owner of a rosca shop). The large majority of women, regardless of education, age or activity are now capable to make small purchases on their own, they have increased economic participation to household expenses and, because of that, the respondents feel more respected and recognized by their family and the Barago community. Furthermore, women feel more empowered in the sense that they have personal income to guarantee education as well as the potential for a better future for their children.

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