THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AN AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN ETHIOPIA (INTERACTIVE PAPER)

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Autonomy is important for entrepreneurs (Rauch & Frese, 2007). However, power holders at household and at societal levels act as “gatekeepers” of resources, who impact the entrepreneurial autonomy of women (Brush 2009). This becomes evident in Ethiopia, where the level of women entrepreneurship in the formal economy remains low despite government initiatives to improve the position of women. For example, fear of domestic violence (Kedir & Admasachew 2010) restrains women’s autonomy in financial decision making and restricts participation in network opportunities for women entrepreneurs. This study explores how women entrepreneurs in Ethiopia perceive their sociocultural context to be either supporting or undermining autonomy in their entrepreneurial activity. We draw on Self Determination Theory (SDT) which states that the satisfaction of basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy are the nutriments for experiencing autonomy or volition in the activities people undertake (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Method

We conducted in depth interviews with twelve women entrepreneurs in Addis Ababa operating business in the formal sector of the economy. A thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) was used to analyze the interview transcripts, and interpret the findings in the context of SDT.

Results and Implication

Interview findings suggest that autonomy support and control were mainly experienced in authority-subordinate relations, in which parents and spouses have power over women, and in religious affiliations. Autonomy supportive social agents provide women with choices for carrier and education, decision making, information, resources and feedback on their activity in nonjudgmental ways. They give women the chance to perceive themselves as competent and autonomous, which helps them to exploit and choose opportunities and run their business in accordance with their personal values and interests. On the other hand, controlling social agents maintain and reinforce the existing male-dominated social and economic order. By undermining women’s need for autonomy, they constrain the performance of women entrepreneurs. Moreover the findings suggest that participants who perceived their relationship with God as autonomy-supportive view God as provider and supporter of their entrepreneurial activity. These findings imply that the facilitation of autonomy-supportive environments for women entrepreneurs lies in promoting gender sensitization programmes in education institutions and community.