

The contribution of microcredit to women's economic empowerment in the context of the Souss Massa region: the capabilities approach "a qualitative analysis"

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Abstract

For several decades, literature on economic and social development has consistently regarded microfinance as one of the most effective tools for promoting sustainable development and empowering women living in precarious situations. It is therefore not surprising to find women's empowerment ranked as the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of the United Nations, which has been succeeded since 2015 by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to Mayoux (2001): "When women have flexible access to credit, they become economically and socially autonomous."

Our paper aims to study the contribution of microcredit to women's empowerment in the Moroccan context, specifically in the Souss Massa region. On a theoretical level, several approaches are used, most of which are derived from socio-economics. For our purposes and in order to carry out our work, we have used the capabilities approach initiated by Amartya Sen (1980). According to Sen, female poverty is understood as a lack of capabilities among women at the economic, social and individual levels.

In terms of methodology, we used qualitative analysis through structured interviews with 11 experts in the field and managers of microcredit institutions operating in the region covered by our study.

The results of the study show that in the context of the Souss Massa region, microcredit has an indirect impact on empowerment. Indeed, the acquisition of capabilities through microcredit plays a mediating role in the process of women's empowerment.

Keywords: Microfinance, Microcredit, Empowerment, Capabilities approach, Impact.

1. Introduction

Over the past forty years, women's empowerment has always been seen as a kind of panacea in the fight against multidimensional poverty among women, led by national governments and international institutions. However, this fight is proving to be complicated and complex. In Morocco, the National Integrated Programme for the Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls by 2030, initiated by the Ministry of Solidarity, Social Integration and Women's Affairs, states that "the economic empowerment of women is considered one of the fundamental gateways to establishing equality between women and men". It is therefore in these deplorable circumstances for women that considerable efforts will be made, particularly in terms of the financial inclusion of women in difficulty, through what is commonly referred to today as microfinance or microcredit. According to Mayoux (2007): "Flexible conditions for access to credit enable women to become more economically and socially independent." Thus, in the context of women's financial inclusion, microfinance or microcredit has become the cornerstone of the fight against poverty over the last thirty years.

On a theoretical and philosophical level, several approaches and doctrines have been tested to understand the intensity and nature of microcredit's impact on the lives of

women beneficiaries. For our part, in order to carry out our current research, we have used the capabilities approach founded by Amartya Sen (1980) and developed by Martha Nussbaum (2000).

In terms of the methodology used and data collection, we employed a qualitative analysis conducted on a sample of 11 experts and managers of microcredit institutions operating in the Souss-Massa region. To this end, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted in a direct, face-to-face manner using an interview guide.

We used NVIVO 12 software to analyze our data.

The results of our qualitative analysis show that access to microcredit actively contributes to the development of certain capabilities that positively influence women's empowerment.

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

2.1. Conceptual framework

Firstly, it should be noted that the two key concepts of our study, namely microcredit and economic empowerment, have been defined in hundreds of ways by academics, practitioners and decision-makers alike.

With regard to the concept of microcredit, our reading of the main definitions shows that microfinance or microcredit is defined by three characteristics, namely:

- The target audience: microcredit is aimed at people who are economically and socially excluded from the labour market and the traditional financial system;
- The objective: the financing of income-generating activities (IGAs) and/or microenterprises;
- The amount: small loans that take into account their repayment capacity.

According to Guerin, Lapenu and Doligez (2009), microfinance is a hybrid financing system in that it falls between informal financing practices and a banking system that is virtually inaccessible to the poorest people due to a lack of collateral.

For his part, Lelart defines MF as "local finance that adapts to needs and is part of the logic of providing financial services to a population that does not have access to banks" (Lelart, 2005).

As for the concept of economic empowerment, it should first be noted that several other terms are used to refer to economic empowerment, the main one being empowerment.

Keller & Mbewe (1991) define empowerment as "a process by which women acquire the organisational capacity to increase their autonomy, the capacity to ensure independence in their choices and the capacity to control their resources, which will consequently enable them to eliminate their own dependence".

For their part, Ibarraran and Shady (2009) argue that women's empowerment is defined as "the expansion of women's rights, resources and capacity to make decisions and act independently in the social, economic and political spheres".

Having defined the concepts addressed in this article, we will now turn to the theoretical framework of our research, namely the capabilities approach initiated by Sen and developed by Nussbaum.

2.2. The theoretical framework

In this section, we will present the approach outlined by its founder, Amartya Sen, before moving on to the work that has attempted to refine the concept of capabilities by presenting Ms Nussbaum's approach. In order to introduce the capabilities approach, Sen begins by referring to what he calls "the general opportunity of the person" and "the way people perceive this opportunity". To explain the different ways in which individuals can seize opportunities, he borrows the utilitarian and resource-based approaches from neoclassical economic theory. Sen argues that the two theories mentioned above are

necessary for understanding inequality and poverty but remain insufficient. It is in this sense that Sen provides a philosophical vision of the concept of capabilities. He begins by criticising traditional macroeconomic approaches that reduce poverty to simple indicators such as GDP or GNP. To this end, he draws on other indicators such as the degree of freedom and capabilities. In other words, a country's development is primarily linked to the capabilities of its individuals. Within the framework of the capabilities doctrine, Sen addressed the important role played by freedom in the acquisition and strengthening of capabilities. To this end, and according to Sen, it is necessary to emphasise the concept of freedom and its link to capabilities. According to Sen, "there can be no responsibility if the means of real freedom are not provided". To refine his analysis, the author distinguishes between, on the one hand, "opportunity and final outcome", which concern "what a person may ultimately have as a result, regardless of what they wanted to be or have at the outset". And, on the other hand, "opportunity and overall outcome", which represent the broad definition of opportunity. For Sen, distinguishing between "opportunity and final outcome" and "opportunity and overall outcome" is useful when transitioning from the central idea of freedom to the concept of capabilities. Indeed, according to Sen, "the freedoms and capabilities we enjoy can also be valuable to us, and it is ultimately up to us to decide how we use them."

In line with Sen's ideas, some authors seek to operationalise the concept of capabilities by listing a repertoire of capabilities that individuals must possess. Thus, the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum presents a relatively exhaustive version comprising a list of 10 capabilities called core capabilities. The table below presents the list of 10 capabilities identified by Martha Nussbaum:

Table: The grid of capabilities according to M. Nussbaum

Capabilities	Justification
Life	The ability to live a normal human life: not dying prematurely
Physical health	Being able to enjoy good health (having adequate nutrition, having appropriate housing)
Physical integrity	Being able to move freely (being safe from acts of violence)
The senses, imagination and thought	Being able to use one's senses, imagine, think and reason
Emotions	Being able to feel attachment to things and people outside oneself
Practical reason	Being able to form a conception of good
Affiliation	Being able to live with other people Possessing the social foundations of self-respect and refusal to be humiliated
Play	Being able to laugh and engage in activities

Control over one's own environment	Being able to participate in political choices that govern one's life; having the right to political participation
Capital and income	Being able to own productive capital (e.g. livestock), financial capital, access credit, use and control one's income

Source: Quoted by M. Nussbaum in "Women and Equality: A Capability Approach", International Labour Review 1999.

3. Methodology, data collection and analysis

3.1. Data collection and presentation of the methodology adopted

To carry out our exploratory research, we opted for a qualitative analysis. The aim of this analysis was to ascertain the perceptions and opinions of stakeholders in the microcredit sector regarding the sector's contribution to women's empowerment, using a capabilities approach. To do this, we collected data for our qualitative study from semi-structured interviews with 11 experts and managers of microcredit institutions operating in the Souss-Massa region.

The 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face using an interview guide. In addition to the interviewee's information sheet, the guide included three key themes derived from our review of theoretical and empirical literature, namely: access to microcredit, the contribution of microcredit to women's empowerment, and the mediating effect of capabilities. The average duration of each interview was estimated at 35 minutes.

In terms of sample size, we selected 11 experts and MFI managers to interview, adhering to the two principles of validity necessary for more reliable qualitative research: on the one hand, the principle of theoretical semantic saturation of interviews, which recommends stopping when an additional interview no longer provides new information compared to that already collected, and on the other hand, the principle of diversification, which allows for the inclusion of the greatest possible variety and a more meaningful view of the population studied (Lotfy et al.; 2025). For this reason, we diversified the profiles of the people interviewed according to the following three criteria: diversification according to the city where the IMCs are located; institutional diversification (the people interviewed are spread across the four microcredit institutions present in the Souss-Massa region, namely: AL AMANA, ATTAWFIK, ARRAWAJ and ARDI) and, finally, diversification according to the position held. At this level, we interviewed people within the institution (regional directors, branch managers and sales) and two independent experts active in the field of microfinance and women's empowerment.

3.2. Data analysis

In order to analyze our data, we felt it would be useful to follow a semantic processing approach based on categorical content analysis.

In the jargon of data analysis methods, thematic content analysis is a method widely used in qualitative studies. In this regard, great attention is paid to identifying recurring and repetitive themes. To process the responses contained in the 11 interviews, we used Nvivo12 software.

In management sciences, Nvivo12 software is frequently used to conduct qualitative research (Lazrak et al, 2024). According to Moncada (2025), this software is flexible in terms of coding. Firstly, the code tree is not limited, allowing an unlimited number of codes

to be created. It also offers flexible operations such as code creation, reformulation, deletion, merging and hierarchisation.

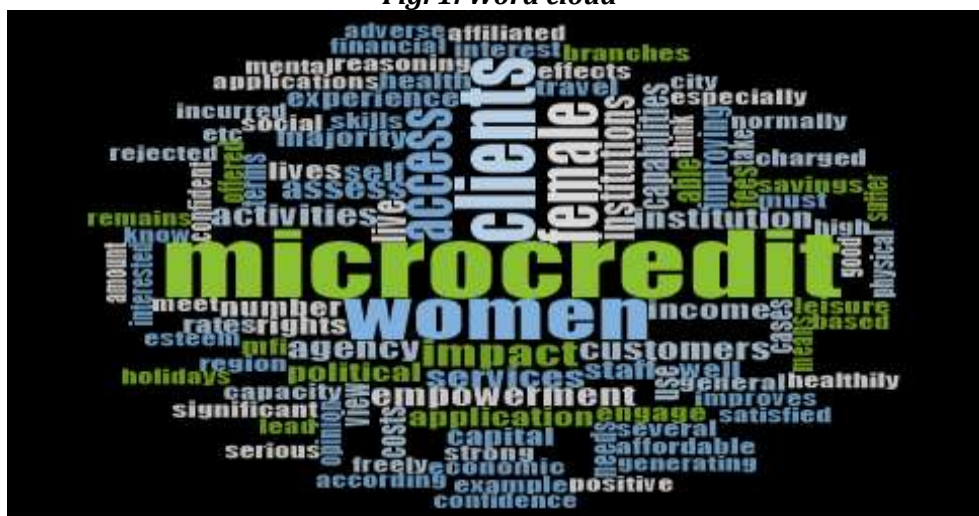
4. Presentation and discussion of results

The first point in this paragraph will present the results of our qualitative analysis (4.1), while the second point will be devoted to discussing the results (4.2).

4.1. Presentation of the results of the analysis

The first output of our analysis is presented in the figure 1 below, which shows the density of words used by respondents during the interviews. This is presented in the form of a "word cloud". The word cloud gives an idea of the various factors that contribute directly or indirectly (mediating effect of capabilities) to understanding the role of microcredit in women's empowerment.

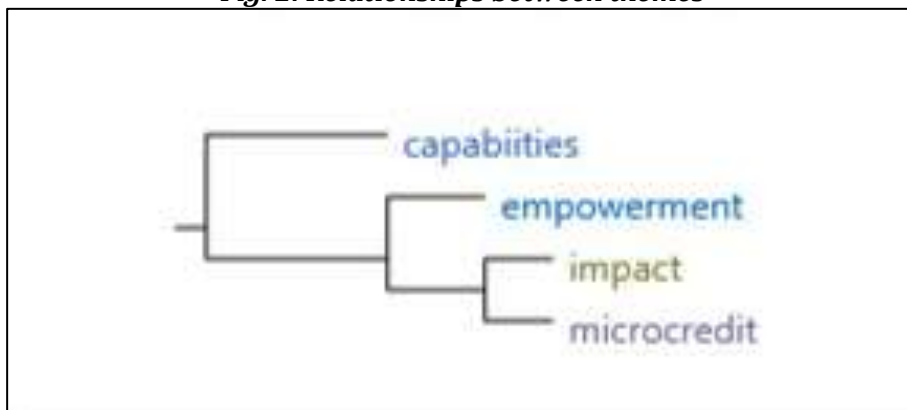
Fig. 1: Word cloud



Source: Author's own work based on Nvivo12

The words that are important and close to the centre are those most frequently used by respondents in their answers: microcredit, clients, women, access, capabilities, impact. In the same vein, another output shows the existence of direct relationships between the main themes selected by our research model. The figure 2 below shows the relationships between the themes covered by our analysis.

Fig. 2: Relationships between themes



Source: Author's own work based on Nvivo12

To analyse the 11 interview guides, we used content analysis based on the following three themes: Access to microcredit; Impact of microcredit; and Capabilities.

Theme 1: Access to Microcredit

According to the experts and MFI managers interviewed, the conditions for women's access to microcredit in the Souss Massa region are mostly favourable in terms of interest rates, costs incurred, number of branches, etc.

Theme 2: Impact of Microcredit:

To study the influence of microcredit on empowerment, we analysed it from the perspective of the five aspects outlined below:

- Access to social rights: based on the experts' responses, we found that microcredit gives female clients better access to social rights. These rights include access to healthcare, school supplies for children and quality food.
- Economic empowerment: according to the managers interviewed, access to microcredit has had a strong and positive impact on women's economic empowerment. In this regard, it provides them with a certain degree of financial independence, but above all, it enables the development of income-generating and employment-creating activities (IGEA). To this end, according to the regional manager of the AMANA institution, "microcredit enables women to develop income-generating activities by acquiring the equipment and purchasing the goods necessary for their activity".
- Political rights: The responses collected concerning the relationship between microcredit and access to political rights show that this relationship is very weak or even non-existent, as women are more focused on their income-generating activities and on repaying their microloans (stress), with the aim of avoiding defaults and late payments to the institution.
- Improved well-being: respondents' answers show that access to microcredit plays a key role in improving women's well-being. According to experts, women are increasingly prioritising physical health and report that it has improved thanks to microcredit.
- Adverse or undesirable effects of microcredit: according to the responses of the experts interviewed, the adverse effects of microcredit on the lives of women who are clients of microcredit associations remain very limited and are confined to a few isolated and very specific cases.

Theme 3: Capabilities

The responses from our exploratory study show that access to microcredit enables women to acquire the capabilities necessary for their empowerment. These capabilities include, on the one hand, those relating to women's health and physical integrity: thanks to microcredit, the majority of women now have access to healthcare and increasingly frequent medical consultations, and they have become able to move around freely and safely. On the other hand, they have gained great self-esteem and self-confidence: women have become capable of self-control and self-assessment, and they are able to better control their environment. In the same vein, we can also point out that the majority of women have acquired skills in terms of capital accumulation and income generation through income-generating activities and employment made possible by microcredit.

4.2. Discussion of results

The analysis of our exploratory study has therefore led to two major conclusions. Firstly, the study has enabled us to assess the impact of access to microcredit on women's empowerment through the acquisition of social and economic rights and the improvement of their well-being. Secondly, the results of the thematic analysis show that

microcredit plays an important role in the acquisition of the capabilities necessary for the development of women's empowerment.

With regard to "access to microcredit", interviews with experts and managers of microcredit institutions validated the first construct in terms of determining the extent to which it can be transposed to the Souss Massa region. Following our 11 interviews, the items that contribute to women's access to microcredit are: the number of branches, the multiplicity of costs, the diversity and improvement of services, user confidence, affordability, the rejection rate and outstanding loans.

With regard to "women's empowerment", it should first be noted that the multidimensional nature of this concept required us to divide it into five dimensions: access to social rights, economic empowerment, improvement of women's well-being, access to political rights and adverse effects. To this end, our study did not validate two items. Firstly, access to political rights. According to the responses of those interviewed, despite the fact that some women prefer to vote during election periods, the vast majority remain indifferent to the world of politics (according to the regional manager of the ARDI foundation: "Despite the fact that some women vote during election periods, the vast majority show no interest in the world of politics"). Secondly, adverse effects: experts stated that these effects are minimal or even non-existent (according to the regional manager of the Al Amana institution: "The adverse effects of microcredit on the degree of women's empowerment are virtually non-existent").

In terms of "capabilities," the results of our qualitative analysis show that access to microcredit actively contributes to the development of certain capabilities that positively influence women's empowerment. For example, according to the majority of responses, some women borrowers have been able to develop capacities related to bodily integrity, as defined by Naussbaum, by moving freely, whether to get to their place of work or to visit their families in other cities, and they have also been able to improve their access to healthcare. Similarly, according to the experts consulted, the majority of women have been able to develop a regular income and accumulate capital through income-generating activities such as sewing, argan oil production and bread making. In the same vein, other women have gained greater self-esteem and self-confidence.

5. Conclusion

Before concluding our study, let us first recall that our concern was to analyse the link between microcredit and women's empowerment in the context of the Souss Massa region. To do so, we opted for the capabilities approach initiated by A. Sen and refined by M. Nussbaum. Based on our qualitative analysis, we can conclude that microcredit plays a fundamental role in improving women's empowerment and developing capabilities that enable them to achieve financial independence and economic and social emancipation.

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Appendix

Interview guide for managers, executives of microcredit institutions and experts in the field

This interview guide is part of a research project addressing the impact of access to microcredit on women's empowerment: the mediating effect of capabilities « the case of the Souss-Massa region ». We would like to thank you for taking the time to complete our guide.

I- Identification of the interviewee

Informant status:

Years of experience:

II- Access to microcredit

1-Are microcredit services located far from your clients' place of residence?

2-Are you satisfied with the number of microcredit institutions in your region?

3-How do you view the costs incurred by clients to access microcredit services?

4-Do the financial services offered by MFI meet the needs of clients?

- 5-How would you describe the relationship of trust between clients and the institution's staff?
- 6-How do you view the interest rates charged by MFI?
- 7-What is your opinion of the number of microcredit applications that are rejected?
- 8-How would you assess the savings capacity of MFI clients?

III- Impact of microcredit in terms of women's empowerment

- 1- How do you assess the impact of microcredit on women's access to social rights (food, health, education, etc.)?
- 2- How do you assess the impact of access to microcredit on improving women's economic empowerment (income, capital)?
- 3- How do you assess the impact of microcredit on women's access to political rights? 4- How do you assess the impact of microcredit on improving women's well-being?
- 5- How do you assess the adverse effects of microcredit on women's empowerment?

IV- Capabilities

- 1- Do you believe that women clients have the capabilities to live normally?
- 2- Do women clients of MFI have the means to live in good health?
- 3- Are female clients able to travel freely?
- 4- Are female clients able to use their reasoning skills?
- 5- In your opinion, do female clients have self-confidence?
- 6- In your experience, do female clients have self-esteem?
- 7- Do female clients engage in leisure activities?
- 8- Are female clients affiliated with political parties?
- 9- Do female customers have income and capital?