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A Study on Socio-cultural Influences of Inclusive Business

Unpacking the Influence of Business Approaches to Development on the Expansion of Women's Choices and Empowerment: A Case Study of a Handicraft Business in the Kyrgyz Republic

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Unpacking the influence of business approaches to development on the expansion of women's choices and empowerment: A case study of a handicraft business in the Kyrgyz Republic

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Abstract

Over the last decade, collaboration with the private sector in international development has accelerated to empower target populations and realise a sustainable society without inequality and poverty. Existing studies show that paid work could empower vulnerable people, such as women, by expanding their opportunities and the lifestyles to which they have access. However, interrelationships between economic (e.g. income) and non-economic (e.g. empowerment) benefits are not as straightforward as the literature on inclusive business suggests.

This paper explores the case of a development project in the Kyrgyz Republic supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in collaboration with a Japanese retail and manufacturing corporation. The felt business upon which they collaborated eventually involved hundreds of women (producers) in villages scattered around Lake Issyk-Kul. This study analyses interviews with local stakeholders, especially felt producers and their families, and reveals both the economic and non-economic effects of the business and their impacts on producers, families, and communities at large. Paid work allows producers to contribute to their household economy, which, in turn, enhances their self-respect. In contrast, the data also show that women's decisions to participate in the business depended on their individual circumstances, such as the availability of family support and particularly the understanding of their husbands. The paper suggests that the application of business approaches to development has both potential benefits and limitations, since the creation and maintenance of choices and empowerment for women are affected by the intricate relationships between the economic and non-economic aspects of their lives.

Keywords: inclusive business, women, choice, empowerment, capability, Kyrgyzstan

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It was in the mid-afternoon. In the quiet workshop, 10-15 producers were making felt products and seemingly concentrating on their work. I heard music out of nowhere. It sounded like pop music, but it was not in English. Suddenly, three women left their chairs and moved in front of the other women. The sound of the music became louder. The music seemed to be from someone's mobile phone. The three women were smiling and dancing to the music. Their dance lasted a couple of minutes; some women stopped making products, and some continued to work. All were smiling. A relaxed and fun atmosphere spread in the room. When the song was over, one of the three women came to me and asked me to show them a Japanese dance. Other women also started asking me. I presented a dance, singing a song. All of the women looked happy. After my dance, they returned to their work. The room became quiet again. The dance was a brief break in the intense work (One scene in a workshop, 8 June 2016).

Introduction

The workshop is a special place for women living in the rural areas of Kyrgyzstan. As the vignette suggests, the felt workshop provides a space outside women's mundane home routines. While working, they enjoy their time as individuals apart from their families. They also share their personal and family issues with their co-workers. Simultaneously, their family members, such as their children and husbands, sometimes visit them in the workshop, for instance, to chat about what happened at school or discuss urgent matters. The workspace is an intersection of women's inseparable multiple roles as mothers, wives, daughters-in-law, and producers who participate in paid work.

The challenge of solving development issues through business approaches has increased in popularity and accelerated collaborations with the private sector in the field of international development. International and bilateral donors have designed and implemented various

development projects with the aims of empowering their target people, communities, and countries through business activities and realising a sustainable society without inequality and poverty.

Inclusive business models, by advocating partnerships with the private sector and resolving the long-term challenges associated with narrowing economic disparities and inequalities, have been promoted to include low-income populations in value chains in various forms by multilateral donors, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2008), and related initiatives, such as the Business Call to Action (BCtA) (n.d.-a). Bilateral donors have also followed this trend by promoting business approaches and encouraging collaborations with the private sector. Behind such promotion lies the belief that inclusive business models benefit vulnerable populations by helping them realise 'higher productivity, sustainable earnings and greater empowerment' (UNDP 2008, 2). In the existing literature on inclusive business, most notably in donor reports (e.g. ADB 2016; Jenkins et al. 2011; UNDP 2008), the economic benefits of models that include beneficiaries as producers have been widely discussed and verified.

This paper examines the influence of income generation activities on women's lives by exploring an inclusive business supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in the Kyrgyz Republic. Due to the lack of human resources and necessary infrastructure, less developed countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, tend to be excluded from investment by international corporations and are typically marginalised in global markets. Drawing on the experiences and perspectives of the participants (most of whom are women) and their family members, this paper investigates the ways in which they have been able to expand their opportunities and gain empowerment through the development of their capabilities despite this situation. The respondents' voices describe the realities of being employed women in rural areas, how the introduction of business activities has influenced and changed their lives, and how they and their family members have understood these changes. Their individual experiences reveal that

interrelationships between economic (e.g. income) and non-economic (e.g. empowerment) benefits are not as straightforward as the literature on inclusive business contends, but are delicate and sensitive, reflecting the specific circumstances where they play multiple roles required by their traditions and norms, especially in rural areas. For instance, participation in income-generating activities might raise women's social/home status and empower them. On the other hand, it might not fit well into their daily routines as mothers and wives and requires them to negotiate with their family members. By investigating these issues, this work aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of how the social circumstances in which these individuals live are intricately related to their choices and the effect of development projects and programmes that aspire, either explicitly or implicitly, to affect their participation and empowerment. The capability approach provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the complex connection between their choices and empowerment.

First, this paper reviews some of the literature related to women and work, followed by a presentation of the methodology of this study. Second, the paper examines the socio-economic circumstances surrounding women in Kyrgyzstan and the development project implemented by JICA. Next, data collected through fieldwork are analysed and discussed, with a special focus on women's choices and empowerment. Finally, the paper concludes by suggesting that the application of business approaches to development has both potential and limitations, since the creation and maintenance of women's choices and empowerment are affected by the intricate relationships between the economic and non-economic aspects of their lives. This emphasises the necessity for the careful use of business approaches, an otherwise imperfect tool for development, by considering local circumstances.

1. Women, work, and choice

The relationships between business activities and development issues, such as poverty, socio-economic inequality, gender, education, health, and the environment, are intricate. They have been discussed in the decades that have lapsed since the emergence of socio-economic and environmental problems in less-developed countries caused by, for instance, large multinational corporations. The social responsibility of business entities has been widely recognised and increasingly discussed in both business and international donor circles. Important guidelines and initiatives for controlling corporate behaviour, such as the United Nations (UN) Global Compact and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, have been adopted and implemented by their signatories. International donors have come to recognise the importance of collaboration amongst various partners to solve development issues, the complexities of which have increased in recent years. During the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, the private sector, along with other entities, was highlighted as an important partner for the realisation of such goals. This tendency has been strengthened in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, Goal 8 of the SDGs calls on all parties to 'promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all' (UN 2015).

However, some scholars have found flaws in the concept of applying business approaches to development. For instance, Rai et al. (2019) and Frey (2017), from the viewpoints of gender and human rights, respectively, identify some inherent dilemmas in Goal 8 of the SDGs. Rai et al. (2019, 368) claim that due to its strong emphasis on economic growth, Goal 8 overlooks unpaid 'social reproductive work', such as 'the reproduction and care of human beings, production within the home and informal labour that supports and sometimes challenges the cultural infrastructure of social relations' that women and girls tend to bear. Such a shortfall contradicts Goal 5 of the SDGs, which states the desire to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. For

instance, Target 5.4, which requires that businesses 'recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work' makes Goal 8 unachievable (Rai et al. 2019; UN 2015). From the perspective of human rights, Frey (2017) states that Goal 8's agenda of full employment and decent work merged with economic growth is ambiguous, since it is unclear whether full employment and decent work are human rights that require obligatory protection by states or are desired situations deriving from economic growth itself. A human rights approach enables, among other things, the empowerment of civil society and reduces barriers to justice for vulnerable people (HR Joint Statement 2013, cited in Frey 2017, 1175). From the standpoint of human rights, economic growth is a means, not a goal; however, its definition is equivocal in Goal 8 (Frey 2017). The flaws demonstrated by these studies suggest that the implementation of development projects and programmes that apply business approaches to development might cause conflicts and, in practice, complicate the achievement of various goals.

As scholars suggest, the relationship between participation in paid work and empowerment is uncertain. In the development literature, women are often described as a socially and economically vulnerable group, which suggests the necessity for their empowerment. The emphasis on women's vulnerability is seemingly rooted in their socio-economic status within the society, in which their lives and activities tend to be limited to the domestic sphere, and the value of their work tends to be interpreted from the capitalistic viewpoint. Often, however, part of what is traditionally considered 'women's work' is not assigned a monetary value. Thus, in many countries women's work tends to be marginalised and considered only as a supplement to household income, and women support the male members, who are the apparent breadwinners in many families. As women have long been considered vulnerable in this situation, many have pushed for their empowerment. Sen (1999, 202) mentions that 'the empowerment of women is one of the central issues in the process of development for many countries in the world today'. Furthermore, the clear distinction between paid and unpaid work and the wage gap also contribute to such gender-based societal views. As Sen (1990, 128) reminds us:

> The so-called "productive" activities [the making of things in factories or workshops or on land] may be parasitic on other work being done, such as housework and food preparation, the care of children, or bringing food to the field where cultivators are working. Technology is not only about equipment and its operational characteristics but also about social arrangements that permit the equipment to be used and the so-called productive processes to be carried on.

This notion suggests the close relations between productive activities outside the home and 'household activities', such as housework and child-rearing, that are often regarded as '"unproductive" labor' (Sen 1990, 128). These two types of activities are often linked with gender issues and can either cause 'cooperation' or 'conflicts', which are considered required arrangements within and beyond households, or 'social technology' (Sen 1990, 129-130). However, in claiming that women are generally more vulnerable than men without 'support for fundamental functions of a human life', Nussbaum (2000, 1) points out that '[s]hould they [women] attempt to enter the workplace, they face greater obstacles, including intimidation from family or spouse, sex discrimination in hiring, and sexual harassment in the workplace'. Consequently, women tend to be excluded from the labour market.

Women's capabilities and choices, together with the prevailing traditions, influence the gender division of work in their respective societies. 'The *capability* of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection' (Sen 1993, 31, Italics in original). Functionings vary from the very basic elements of one's life, such as having good health with appropriate support, to more complex ones, such as 'being happy, having self-respect, taking part in the life of the community' (Sen 1992, 39). 'Capability' refers to 'a set of vectors of functionings' that are interrelated and consist of 'beings and doings' and are closely linked with one's freedom to choose the type of life that

one would like to have (Sen 1992, 39-40). Capability can enhance one's well-being or the quality of beings. Sen (1992, 2-3) states that:

> Equality is judged by comparing some particular aspect of a person (such as income, or wealth, or happiness, or liberty, or opportunities, or rights, or need-fulfilments) with the same aspect of another person. Thus, the judgement and measurement of inequality is thoroughly dependent on the choice of the variable (income, wealth, happiness, etc.) in terms of which comparisons are made. I shall call it the 'focal variable'—the variable on which the analysis focuses, in comparing different people. [...] The chosen focal variable can, of course, have an *internal plurality*.

Sen (1993, 35) further mentions that '[t]he assessment of the elements in a range of choice has to be linked to the evaluation of the freedom to choose among that range'. Thus, the notion of freedom seems to be the key to understanding women's capabilities and choices.

Studies have shown that paid work could empower vulnerable people by expanding their choices in terms of the types of life they prefer to have. The success of microcredit activities, such as the Grameen Bank, to empower vulnerable people, especially women, highlights such a perspective (Selinger 2008; Yunus 2011). In their research on the 'inclusive market', which includes African youth in the global market economy, Dolan and Pajak (2016, 527) find that some youth entrepreneurs who participated in inclusive market initiatives not only gained a measure of income but also developed confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of autonomy. Thus, economic power brought about by paid work could enhance the non-economic aspects of the lives of socially and economically vulnerable people.

Nevertheless, it remains uncertain whether the enhancement of capacity that donors think should always be praised and could actually bring benefits and happiness to those who exercise their freedom of choice. In fact, it might change the vectors of some functionings and cause conflict with others. For example, when women exercise their ability to choose the kind of life

they want, such as being able to participate in income-generating activities, they often face conflicts with their gender roles and duties as homemakers and mothers, as previously explained by Nusbaum (2000, 1). Many studies have addressed such conflicts. One of them is Endeley's (2001) research on two societies in Cameroon. In both societies, many people understand the personal and social benefits that can be gained by women's participation in income-generating activities; however, woman are only allowed to do so under the condition that they continue to play traditional gender roles at home (Endeley 2001, 39). Endeley (2001) further finds that the empowerment of women in relation to income generation and decision-making has complex relationships with the different socio-cultural values of the two societies and that access to money is just one element of achieving women's empowerment. Tanaka's (2016) study also reveals the diversity of women's choices related to land rights in modernisation in rural Tanzania. Gaining of control over land is not causally related to improving their agricultural product and lives as the existing development literature explains. Women's capabilities are closely linked with the different values fostered in their surrounding social, economic, and cultural circumstances. Sen (1999, 77) points out that '[t]o insist on the mechanical comfort of having just one homogeneous "good thing" would be to deny our humanity as reasoning creatures'. In this sense, women's empowerment has a complex nature in actual practice.

Despite Sen's sensitive analysis of human beings' capabilities, some scholars have raised questions about his approach. For example, in her discussion on relations between globalisation and women's paid work, Koggel (2003, 179) critically writes that 'Sen concentrates on the positive impact of women's increased workforce participation on their freedom and agency'. Koggel (2003, 167) further states that the influences of the power of globalisation and the pressure of local systems on women's work must be considered. Meanwhile, drawing on bargaining theories that posit the allocation of household resources in the process of bargaining, Iversen (2003, 106) warns against placing too much emphasis on material or economic power, which might make observers blind to the potential agency of women. Women's agency enable them to

negotiate power within households. He also points out 'the interconnected dimension of individual capabilities' and mentions that '[a] person's capability, or well-being freedom, reflects the alternative combinations of functionings he or she can achieve' (Iversen 2003, 93, 95). Sen is certainly aware of the fact that paid work, or any form of economic activity, is interlinked with other types of work. Indeed, as Koggel herself points out, the positive side of women's economic activities is highlighted in Sen's works, which put the less-positive aspects aside. However, Sen (1990, 264) explains the less-positive side in terms of the diversity of individuals.

When the capability approach is applied to women, doing so seems to suggest the necessity of considering work-life balance in relation to their families. Hobson (2011, 157) states that Sen's capability is formed by three factors, which are individual (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age, human capital), environmental (e.g. physical surroundings, technological infrastructure), and societal (e.g. social and legal norms, public policies) factors. For instance, Hobson (2011, 159) examines women's capability to achieve work-life balance in a European context and reveals that tapping into family support networks is a key strategy to maintaining their work-life balance. Such family support is often provided by relatives, especially grandparents, who share parents' responsibilities, such as childcare. Without these support networks, women's individual choices and their social responsibilities would be in conflict with each other. Women's choices are not either/or between isolated individualism, which means pursuing their own interests without concerns about others, and hierarchical community, which puts women in a vulnerable position (Nussbaum 2000, 289). All three factors must be considered in relation to women's capabilities, as they influence women's work-life balance and the well-being of both women and their families. The capability approach helps in understanding the diversity of individual women by considering all aspects of the environment in which they live. This paper applies this approach to examine the influence of paid work on the lives of Kyrgyz women who have started earning income through their participation in producing and exporting felt products to a global market with the support of a development project.

2. Methodology

It is often difficult to measure capabilities due to the complexity of the diverse combination of choices. Sato (2016), for instance, raises two important issues related to the measurement of Sen's notion of 'capability'. One is the counting issue. The combination of and priority among numerous choices, which influence one's capability, are difficult to 'count' at both the individual and community levels (Sato 2016, 33-39). There are also space and time issues, such as the cultural and generational changes in a given society (Sato 2016, 38). Another issue is related to who evaluates capability. For instance, insiders, such as the target people of a development project, see its impacts on individual or community and income or health differently from outsiders (Sato 2016, 39). Sometimes, there might be a trade-off among various choices within individuals and between individuals and the community. The capability of a particular individual is closely related to others' capabilities, which makes it difficult to evaluate the former outside of his/her context (Sato 2016, 42). In other words, a particular capability of a woman/community cannot be evaluated separately from others' capabilities. Therefore, it can be quite challenging to understand what the expansion of women's choices means, especially if such an expansion can improve their capabilities and whether it is sustainable.

To overcome the problem of evaluation of capabilities, the current study used qualitative research methods, such as semi-structured interviews and observations. Qualitative research has a particular strength for understanding and explaining sensitive social phenomena in a nuanced way. I conducted fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan several times from 2015 to 2016 using this approach for the collection of data. The main target group consisted of people who lived in villages scattered around Lake Issyk-Kul and participated in business activities, specifically felt production and sales, with the support of JICA. Most of the felt producers involved in the production of hand-made felt products were women, and the majority were wives of farmers. The respondents were recruited through formal (through JICA) and informal networks (including those of project staff

members and leaders of producer groups). About 30 felt producers (including felt sample makers who were project staff members), 13 husbands, and other family members (e.g. grandparents, children[1]) were interviewed, most of whom lived in the southern part of Lake Issyk-Kul (the numbers of interviewees are shown in the Appendix). The interviewees also included villagers, village heads, and local government staff members for the purpose of determining how the participation of women in business activities was seen by other members of the communities. Producers were interviewed mainly in their houses and/or the workshops where they worked. Each interview lasted one to two hours. Three group interviews among producers in three villages were also conducted. Kyrgyz assistants, who were fluent in Kyrgyz, Russian, and English were hired to provide support for the preparation for and implementation of the interviews. They were also important informants who explained Kyrgyz culture throughout the fieldwork. With the permission of the respondents, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed and translated into English.

During the fieldwork, the socio-cultural environments of various villages were observed by visiting workshops and houses to interview respondents. During one of the field visits, I also had short homestays at four houses in three villages. Although each homestay was short (one night per house) due to the limited time of the fieldwork, I was able to closely observe part of Kyrgyz culture, especially the social norms and customs related to, for instance, gender, ethnicity, and age. The middle-aged assistant who accompanied these trips supported the homestay by interpreting conversations, sharing information she obtained through communicating with the host families, and explaining Kyrgyz customs and appropriate behaviours. With her support, I could talk with family members and join them in preparing dinners and milking cows. These experiences helped to confirm my knowledge based upon existing literature and enhance it in a more nuanced way. Moreover, while analysing the collected data, I was mindful of the influence that my status as a research fellow at the JICA Research Institute might have had on the

[1] The interviews with children were conducted in the presence of their adult family members.

interviewees. While the position might lead to biased responses, it also helped in gaining their trust.

3. Women's socio-economic circumstances in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is a multi-ethnic, landlocked country in Central Asia that is surrounded by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. It was part of the Russian empire until the middle of the nineteenth century, when it became the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic within the Soviet Union (Elebaeva 1999). The population of Kyrgyzstan (the majority of whom are ethnic Kyrgyz) is 6.5 million, and its economy has shifted from agriculture to services in recent decades (IFC 2020; WB n.d.-a). In 2019, services comprised 54% of GDP, 16.7% of which was from the export of services; services are followed by industry (21%), agriculture (14%), and construction (11%) (IFC 2020, 15-16). Gold is an important export commodity (IFC 2020; WB n.d.-b). In Kyrgyzstan, as in other Central Asian countries, trade in retail locations, such as bazaars, has contributed to its economy (Spector 2008). Remittances, which total 28% of GDP, are also important for the economy (IFC 2020, 23).

The socio-economic circumstances of Kyrgyzstan were significantly changed before and after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. As part of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan had been included in the socialist system. Both men and women worked to support the state and their respective families. Thus, their jobs and related benefits (social welfare) were secured and protected by the state. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan became independent and began to shift to a market economy. This shift was led by a privatisation programme, which was implemented rapidly and focused on state-owned enterprises in the sectors of services, trade, industry, and agriculture (Namazie 2002, 31-34). The decrease in production levels, price liberalisation, and the reduction of public expenditures resulted in inflation and the increased prices of goods, which in turn, lowered living standards, including

those of working people (Namazie 2002, 34). Subsequently, the poverty rate increased during 1993-1996 (Namazie 2002, 46-48). The loss of benefits and the lack of cash partly caused by the introduction of the som, a new currency, compelled people to sell their products (e.g. agricultural products from their gardens) at local bazaars, rather than offering such products as gifts to maintain social ties (Kuehnast 2003, 44). This kind of behavioural change thus influenced social norms and personal networks, which had previously supported the informal economy during the Soviet era (Kuehnast 2003). For instance, Botoeva's (2015) study on a village in Kyrgyzstan reveals that as the market economy progressed, social networks fostered through gift-exchange in the moral economy were subtly monetised by cash becoming the preferred gift in various celebrations. During this complex transformation, people without enough money became excluded from social support networks among relatives, friends, and community members, which was gradually stratifying the society (Botoeva 2015). These transitions severely affected vulnerable people, including women.

From the beginning of the twentieth century to the late twentieth century, Kyrgyz women and men enjoyed having free education and health services under the Soviet Union (SIAR 2004, 8-9). Social services, such as pre-school institutions for their children, enabled a great number of women to take part in paid work, although these were relatively lower-paid and lower-status jobs compared to those available to men (SIAR 2004, 8-9). However, the transition from the Soviet system to a market economy drastically changed people's lives. By about ten years of the transition period after the independence of Kyrgyzstan, the formal employment rate of women had declined from 83% to 47.4% without enough support from public services, and their wages were 64.9% of the average wage of men by 2002 (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2003b, cited in ADB 2005, 27-28). These drastic changes forced women to join the informal sector (e.g. shuttle traders, street vendors, home workers, paid caregivers) and rendered them vulnerable to insecurity without social services (e.g. sick and maternity leave, pension contributions). Moreover, women had to continue fulfilling their responsibilities in taking care of the children and the elderly

without government support (ADB 2005, xii). In post-Soviet countries, gender roles were also reinvented in the process of restoring traditions (Kandiyoti 2007), and Kyrgyzstan was not an exception.

In 1992, Kuehnast (2003, 35) conducted a qualitative study in Kyrgyzstan after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. She states that '[t]hey [women] lost not only their economic security, but also, and just as troubling to many, their self-respect and social position in society'. Women experienced the 'poverty shock' and struggled to survive (Kuehnast 2003). Before 1991, women's 'economic security' as well as 'self-respect' and 'social position' had all been supported by the centrally planned socio-economic system of the Soviet Union. However, during the transition, women had little socio-economic support and benefits provided by the government, which was also struggling to establish its system, and lost social networks to manage their households, while fulfilling their role of providing care for the children and the elderly (Kuehnast 2003, 33-34). At the same time, women with large families were no longer honoured by the title of 'mother heroes', which had been introduced in 1944 to increase the birth rate (Conze 2001, 227-230; Kuehnast 2003, 35). About 77% of women interviewed by Kuehnast had lost their jobs, and those without experiences and connections were unfortunately forced to engage in prostitution (Kuehnast 2003, 37, 40-42).

Furthermore, social ties, which had been established by traditional reciprocal relationships, were weakened due to the women's inability to give and receive gifts and opportunities for becoming and/or receiving guests. The loss of jobs not only diminished their economic base, but also their social status, which eventually rendered the women unable to participate in productive activities for the country and made them 'embarrassed' to talk about their unemployment (Kuehnast 2003, 43). In rural areas, the higher costs of public transportation also reduced women's mobility, resulting in their isolation and the weakening of social networks (Kuehnast 2003, 43).

During this period, while women lost their paid work, they were expected to continue fulfilling their responsibilities to do unpaid domestic work, such as housework, child and elderly care, and work in home gardens. In fact, except during the Second World War, when women had been able to perform jobs reserved for men and thus experience upward social mobility, unequal gender division in both paid and unpaid work had continued during the Soviet era and even well after independence (Conze 2001; Heinen 1990; Kuehnast 2003). Women's unpaid work was hardly recognised as having any monetary value, although it certainly supported their families.

This unequal gender division was observed and heard in discussion during fieldwork. Although the women 'worked' at home, their unpaid work was invisible and hardly valued by outsiders and family members. Moreover, such unpaid work was not associated with women's 'self-respect and social position'.

4. Women's participation in business activities through JICA projects

Japan' Official Development Assistance (ODA) for Kyrgyzstan started in 1996 and the two countries signed a technical cooperation agreement in 2004 (MOFA 2017, 148). Through its ODA, Japan aims to support the sustainable, balanced economic development of Kyrgyzstan by focusing on the maintenance of deteriorating infrastructure and rural development (MOFA 2017, 148). JICA started providing technical training for Kyrgyzstan in 1993 (MOFA 1995, 11). It has implemented various projects for transportation infrastructure development, agricultural and rural development, and human resource development, which are expected to contribute to poverty reduction through economic growth by assisting the transition to a market economy (JICA n.d.). The total value of its programmes was 2,042 million yen in FY2019 (JICA 2020, 26). This section briefly explains how village women around the Lake Issyk-Kul area came to participate in business activities with the support of JICA and, later on, in collaboration with a Japanese company.

In the transition economy after the 1991 independence, village communities were also considerably affected. The previously existing social capital, which had been fostered through, for instance, collective agriculture, was weakened due to the increasingly limited access to resources for sustaining social relationships (e.g. kin-based relations with distant relatives) based on traditional obligations among people in need in rural areas (Kuehnast and Dudwick 2004). Community based organizations (CBOs), which represented the minimum unit of local socio-economic activities in the Soviet era, became dysfunctional, resulting in the government introducing laws on CBOs and their associations in 2005 to empower communities (JICA 2006, 1-1; 2011, xii-xiii).

Under these circumstances, JICA has been implementing a series of technical cooperation projects—'the Community Empowerment Project in the Issyk-Kul Oblast in the Kyrgyz Republic', the 'Community Empowerment Project through Small Business Promotion by One Village One Product Approach in Issyk-Kul Region', and the 'Project for Dissemination of OVOP Issyk-Kul Model to Other Regions of the Country'[2]—since 2007 to promote socio-economic development through the 'One Village One Product (OVOP) movement' (hereafter referred to as the 'OVOP Project') in the area of Lake Issyk-Kul—. The OVOP movement originated from local development activity in Oita Prefecture, Japan, in 1979, which aimed to encourage the mobilisation of local community members, materials, and cultural resources to create value-added products and services for internal and external markets (Knight 1994). With the expectation of empowering CBOs and, consequently, the communities in which they operate, JICA has been attempting to revitalise local communities by developing a wide range of products, such as handicrafts, processed foods (e.g. jam, honey, dry fruits), woodwork, and skin-care products (e.g. soaps, oils), which use natural resources found in Kyrgyzstan. Some CBOs had been previously established with the support of other international donors, through which their members learnt

[2] The on-going 'Project for Dissemination of OVOP Issyk-Kul Model to Other Regions of the Country' is slated for completion in 2023.

and developed their skills of making felt products and processing foods (JICA 2011, 101). In 2011, JICA officially supported producers to establish the Union of Juridical Entities Association One Village One Product (OVOP Association) and the Issyk-Kul Brand Committee to help organise scattered producers around the huge lake area standardise their products (JICA 2011).[3] By 2018, the members of the OVOP Association had increased to 2,300 people and produced more than 1,500 items (JICA 2018).

Among the CBOs, those producers of felt products developed their knowledge and skills and expanded their activities when a collaboration with JICA was initiated with the Japanese retail manufacturing corporation, Ryohin Keikaku Co., Ltd. (MUJI)[4], a company that sells various household and consumer goods. Since its establishment in 1980, MUJI has been well known for its natural and simple products and packaging designs. As of August 2020, the company, whose headquarters is in Tokyo, has about 480 stores in Japan and about 550 overseas stores throughout North America, Europe, and Asia and the Pacific (Ryohin Keikaku 2020).

The collaboration between JICA and MUJI started in 2010. A staff member of MUJI desired to find new and unique products that would fit with the theme 'ethical' to be promoted in the 2011 Christmas selling season. When collecting information on potential gift items, she found information on traditional handicrafts and processed foods that had been introduced on the back of JICA's official magazines. With the expectation of obtaining information on potential 'ethical' products, the staff member contacted JICA. After some negotiation, JICA and MUJI decided to collaborate, and selected Kyrgyz felt products to develop as gift items. For the OVOP project, the development of new distribution channels was needed to scale up their activities. The collaboration with MUJI would become a precious opportunity to develop skills and business knowledge and expand sale channels internationally.

[3] The OVOP Association included 550 local producers in 64 CBOs from 39 villages in 2011 (Haraguchi 2016).
[4] 'MUJI' is a brand name of Ryohin Keikaku Co., Ltd., which is based in Japan.

22 felt producing CBOs, which 155 producers had joined, received an order for about 11,000 pieces of felt items (i.e., ornaments, phone cases, eyeglass cases) designed by MUJI. The number of orders was much smaller than that of regular items sold by MUJI, but it was much larger than the number of ordinary items typically produced by felt producers. In Kyrgyzstan, as I saw in respondents' houses, felt items are common in everyday life. The Kyrgyz people used to be nomads and lived in yurts, which are movable, round tents covered with felt. Thus, it was customary for them to use felt items from yurts and carpets to create cushions as well as shoes and boots. Felt items are traditionally handmade by women. Until recently, felt products in Central Asia were used only for domestic purposes or as gifts, such as at a wedding, and were not for sale (Bunn 2011, 517). Before receiving the orders from MUJI, felt producers had never made small items, such as ornaments and cases, nor produced large amounts of such items. Although the quality of felt products had been developed with the support of JICA in previous years, it was a huge challenge for local producers to meet the international product standards required by MUJI. At that time, Kyrgyz producers still lacked manufacturing knowledge and skills, especially in making standardised items of the same sizes and shapes. Moreover, producers were scattered around the huge Lake Issyk Kul area, the second largest mountain lake in the world, and their geographical separation was an obstacle in standardising products. They also lacked knowledge about export procedures, as they had never before exported their products (in Kyrgyzstan, few people had export experience at that time).

In cooperation with the OVOP Project, MUJI provided local felt producers with various forms of support to improve product quality. The company reviewed designs and taught producers how to manage and control the production process, such as how to properly manage dangerous tools (e.g. needles, scissors). Local felt producers, the majority of whom were women, made efforts to meet the standards set by MUJI and to overcome their first challenge of 'mass production' from the huge orders placed by MUJI. Through the OVOP Project, JICA created systems of product management and quality control for them. Training was provided in Bishkek

for five representatives of the CBO members, who later taught other members in their villages. Local producers learnt not only the techniques of making felt products but also the timing and process of purchasing wool and calculation of costs. They also developed tools, such as size patterns and boards, for more effective and efficient production. The necessary arrangement was made for export among related organisations. After countless trial and error procedures, Kyrgyz felt products were finally displayed on the shelves of MUJI stores throughout the world and were sold into the global market in the late autumn of 2011. This collaboration between MUJI and JICA helped the local community improve communication between groups and enhanced the exchange of technical information between participants (JICA 2011, 114).

Fortunately, this collaboration between MUJI and JICA continues to date with the support of the OVOP Project, instead of being a one-off, as was initially feared. As Kyrgyz felt items continue to be sold in MUJI stores, they have shown changing and improving product designs and quality. A Japanese expert in the JICA project once pointed out that the significance of the collaboration with MUJI could be evaluated not only by the extent of community empowerment but also by the quality of products (JICA 2011, 114). The continuing business partnership between MUJI and Kyrgyz felt producers proves that the latter's felt products are able to maintain international quality standards. From 2020 until Feb. 2021, special exhibitions were held in MUJI's physical and online stores throughout Japan to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the successful collaboration between MUJI and JICA. As of March 2021, 2,749 felt producers and nine workshops were registered in the Issyk-Kul Oblast (personal communication). Their collaboration has certainly contributed to the significant improvement of the quality of products and felt business in Kyrgyzstan.

The business activities of felt producers have been expanding within and beyond the country. The Public Union OVOP+1 (OVOP+1), established in 2014 by the OVOP Project, provides business and logistical services to the members of the OVOP Association. International networks of social entrepreneurs created by support organisations had rarely reached to Central

Asia by the beginning of 2000 (Grenier 2004, 125-126; 2006, 136). Under this circumstance, the OVOP+1 plays the role of a 'social entrepreneur' and strives to achieve social changes in Kyrgyzstan through a business approach. At present, the OVOP+1, together with the JICA project, connects Kyrgyz producers with domestic and international markets. The OVOP+1 supports the creation of MUJI's 'inclusive supply chain' as reported by IFC (2021). With various kinds of support, felt producers—women—are currently able to sell their products across the world.

5. Diverse experiences of felt producers

Their participation in business activities, especially in dealing with an unprecedented order from MUJI, changed and influenced the lives of felt producers. Their experiences varied according to their individual socio-economic circumstances and the extent to which they had committed to operate their felt business. This section explores the ways in which felt producers worked and coped with the changes brought by their participation in this business.

5.1 Participation in paid work in the felt business

The felt business developed by the OVOP Project and its collaboration with MUJI contributed to the creation of paid work in rural areas. In the villages where fieldwork was conducted, people often said that there was little paid work in their area. The interviewees were typically engaged in livestock farming (e.g. sheep, cows, chickens) and agriculture (e.g. vegetables, fruits) as their main sources of income. However, stable paid jobs are usually only found in public institutions, such as local government offices, schools, and hospitals. Due to the lack of paid work, some male interviewees took temporary work at construction sites, including international donors' project sites in neighbouring areas, and worked in Bishkek and Moscow. Many interviewees had relatives and friends who were working or had worked in Bishkek and Moscow. Others had taken seasonal jobs in tourist destinations around Lake Issyk-Kul. Several female respondents had also worked

in Bishkek or Karakol (the capital of Issyk-Kul Oblast) at some point in their lives. Some worked at garment factories in Bishkek particularly before their marriage. In Kyrgyzstan, in the 2000s, the garment industry that had emerged in the Soviet era was growing by increasing the numbers of small to medium entrepreneurs, who managed their businesses (e.g. sewing workshops) in the informal economy in cities like Bishkek, and had certain advantages, which included relatively low labour costs and low barriers of tariffs and trade (OECD 2014, 26-31; Spector and Botoeva 2017).[5] Some had taken seasonal jobs in tourist destinations around Lake Issyk-Kul. The remittances sent by those who worked outside the villages supported the construction of houses, children's education, daily family needs, celebrations, and so on requirements of their households.

The lack of local paid work can be observed not only in the Issyk-Kul area, but also in many other rural areas in Kyrgyzstan. For instance, in border villages in Batken, southwestern Kyrgyzstan, people leave their villages to search for work in Russia because of the lack of work opportunities back home, the necessity of covering everyday expenses (e.g. food, clothing, or schooling), and the need to generate funds for single, large expenses, such as an upcoming celebration (Reeves 2012, 120). Under such circumstances, the tradition of felt making became a promising business due to the stimulation resulting from MUJI's orders. Responding to questions about her previous work experience, one producer said, 'I did not work. We [women] were always at home, taking care of children. We did not work'. She explained that even after she had taken a class to learn how to use a computer, the skills she had gained only brought occasional casual work to input data during elections. The felt business created job opportunities for those who were looking for paid work, particularly women. In fact, even those women who had higher and professional education also became felt producers.

The reasons women participate in the felt business vary. There are those who had joined felt CBOs due to inadequate household incomes. With the money they earned, some were able to

[5] In 2011, the value of garment production, which includes design, sourcing, cutting, sewing, finishing, packaging and shipping, was estimated as USD 165 million and the industry employed 114,000 (National Statistics Committee, cited in OECD 2014, 19, 28).

purchase, for instance, clothes, cows, furniture, and computers, and some paid tuition fees for children. One interviewee was able to pay a down payment for a truck. A leader of a CBO mentioned that the members earned an average of fifty to sixty thousand som after a few months of work making felt products, which their husbands rarely, or even never, earned within the same period. Thus, the members significantly contributed to their household economy. The words 'fairy tale' were heard many times during the fieldwork. One producer, like many others, used the words to describe the circumstances in which women staying in villages could earn good money through the business. Another producer said that it was 'unbelievable, like a fairy tale' to be able to make a great number of felt products of the same size and quality by hand. The business created an unexpected economic state for the women, which, in turn, motivated them to participate in it. Although income from felt work was not stable and hardly became the main income source for most families, the felt business provided a precious opportunity to have paid work and gain supplemental income for their families.

Meanwhile, some respondents expressed more personal reasons apart from the economic ones. One of the producers said that the women who either had small children or had grown-up children working in Russia chose not to participate in the business, as they could not or did not have a need to do so, respectively. However, some women said that there were non-economic reasons that they considered important in their lives, and these strongly motivated them to join the business. For instance, one woman in her thirties, whose husband was in Russia, said '[t]here was no definite reason. I wanted to engage myself with something else. I was physically and psychologically tired of my routine responsibilities of looking after children and doing work about the house. I wanted a change'. For another woman in her early forties, making felt products became an enjoyable job. Before her marriage, she had worked as a technologist near Karakol for two months after studying in Russia for four years, but she did not like the job. Comparing each job she said, '[w]hen I started this work, with wool, I liked this work right away. Before, I was just a housewife looking after my children and taking care of my father-in-law, an elderly person'.

In summary, these women chose to join the felt business to change their lifestyles and/or gain supplemental incomes for their families.

5.2 Socio-economic impact of the felt business

The emergence of the felt business brought changes in the lives of the village producers. Clearly, it had social and economic impacts. First, there was visible economic improvement among the producers and their households. In particular, the increased purchasing power brought about by the felt business gradually improved their living conditions. One producer explained what she had bought for three years since her participation in 2012. In the first year, she said, '[w]hen I received money, we [her family] decided to buy clothes for children' as well as bedroom furniture. She had purchased kitchen furniture (e.g. sitting table and a fridge) in the second year and a water pipe and a boiler for the house in the third year. She wished to buy a car by the next year. Other producers also purchased something according to the needs of their families, such as daily necessities (e.g. water, electricity, and tax), cows, various expenditures on ceremonial occasions (e.g. travelling expenses, gifts, and foods), and the repayment of bank loans. The economic contributions to their households were visible from the outside and were acknowledged by family and non-family members. A farmer, whose wife was a felt producer, said, '[p]eople in our village have work. […] They bring the [benefits] home, not elsewhere'. When I interviewed a head of a local government, he stated, '[w]hat makes people interested the most? People get interested in earning money [and] improving their living standards. They want to work rather than sit at home jobless'. Their words clearly show that the felt business improved the material lives of the participants and their families.

Notably, the paid work brought about by the felt business made it possible for people to stay in the villages. As mentioned previously, apart from men, women also had to work outside their villages. A man in his late forties had a wife who used to work at a sewing factory near Bishkek for one to two months during summer. When his wife had been away from home, he had

to take care of their four children. He said, ‘now it is good that the [felt] job is in the village—she can be at work and be around home’. Some producers also stopped working outside their villages, as they could earn some money by making felt products.

Another notable influence can be observed from a socio-cultural perspective. For instance, through the OVOP Project and the collaboration with MUJI, people learned new techniques and knowledge. There are two techniques to make felt products: a wet technique to create a shape by using soapy water and a dry technique by using a special needle. In Kyrgyzstan, people traditionally used the wet technique, and almost all the interviewees confirmed that they did not know how to do the dry technique before joining the project. It was also a challenge to make small things, such as toys and cases, in the same sizes and shapes. Felt producers gradually improved their skills and knowledge by teaching and learning from each other following the advice and training provided by JICA and MUJI. A new form of cultural and working practices in felt making thus emerged through outsider involvement, which might be the ‘cultural improvisation’ process that Bunn (2011) identified in the Central Asian felt-making process. They also came to recognise the value of their products in the international market, which compensated for their demanding work (e.g. washing, dying, carding, cleaning, and weighting wools) in making the products. As one representative of the six CBOs in a village proudly stated, ‘we are not manufacturing something primitive, but we are manufacturing world standard products. We are not making products for clients in our village or in Kyrgyzstan. We work with a sense of responsibility and pride’. This ‘sense of responsibility and pride’ was expressed by another leader in a different village. As the leader shared, ‘I say to myself I have to work. I have to work not to be embarrassed in front of the people’.

The felt business also changed the participants’ time management and work ethics. For instance, MUJI’s orders required the participants to follow strict rules and deadlines to meet the quality of the international standard and the timing of sale. Living in villages, people only knew domestic markets with relatively moderate local standards and did not need to consider their daily

schedules to manage their daily work routine to meet a particular deadline. The international standards required by the felt business transformed their work ethics and their lifestyles. For instance, when producers received a large order from MUJI (or other international buyers), they worked at a workshop from morning to evening every day to meet a strict deadline. As many producers had families, they were also responsible for housework, such as cooking and serving meals, cleaning the house, washing clothes, making up beds, taking care of the children and elders, as well as milking cows and growing vegetables in a garden. Such daily routines had to be adjusted so that they could perform the required felt work. As one producer explained:

> Before OVOP [the OVOP Project], I used to do household routines without haste. Now I try to finish household routines faster in order to not be late for work. […] Before I joined [my] CBO, I used to spend one day for doing laundry and one day for baking bread. Nowadays, I get up early in the morning to bake bread [dough was prepared the previous night] and then go to work. After having returned home, I do laundry [and] cook meals.

When a deadline was very tight, this same producer said that she had to work even before going to bed. Another producer also expressed her (and her CBO's) responsibility in meeting deadlines. Even though she had to do something outside, she returned home to make parts of animal toys and send them to a neighbouring village where other producers assembled all the parts to complete the toys. These producers also learnt the importance of maintaining the quality of products. International buyers, along with the OVOP+1 who deals with them, would not accept the products if they did not meet the required international standards. Thus, the felt business compelled many producers to change their ways of living and develop professional work behaviours. In the process of such changes, they often faced so-called 'time poverty'; the women's 'double workday' included participating in economically productive activities as well as caring for households, and/or developing their abilities, such as knowledge and skills (Blackden and Wodon 2006, 1-5)

and challenging for balancing their paid and non-paid work. To deal with this double burden, they also started to exercise bargaining power in their households (Iversen 2003). Most of my respondents were those who had overcome or were in the process of overcoming this burden by gaining the support of and/or negotiating with their families, which is discussed in the following sections.

In addition, the participants were able to expand their social networks by participating in the felt business within and beyond the villages. In Kyrgyzstan, particularly in rural areas, women are expected to stay at home and care for family members. Therefore, the daily living areas of a woman in a village are small, while men have the chance to walk around the village to, for instance, take care of livestock like sheep and cows. Women often do not know the people who live in different parts of their village unless they hear some rumours from neighbours, relatives, and friends. The felt work created a space where these women could interact with new people within and beyond their villages. In such spaces, information on the OVOP project, the felt business, its business partners (including MUJI), and its dependable (though late) payments could be spread from one person to another by face-to-face conversations and/or through SNS. The training sessions organised by the OVOP Project/MUJI in Bishkek and a few selected villages, as well as fairs and exhibitions, became precious opportunities for participants to leave their villages and meet and make friends with new people beyond their typical living spaces. The participants maintained connections with other participants from different villages even after training. After retuning their villages, the participants shared their gained knowledge and skills, ranging from felt production-related techniques to legal documents and administrative procedures related to CBO activities, with other members of their CBOs. In the development of the felt business, some producers, especially CBO leaders, also visited the offices of rural community governments (*ayıl ökmötü*: AO) to seek financial and/or non-financial support to, for instance, prepare workshops with proper equipment, including lighting and heating systems. Such support was necessary to work collectively and improve the efficiency and productivity of their activities.

Such active interactions among producers influenced their relationships as well as those with their family and non-family members. For instance, producers shared their personal and family problems and advised one another during working at workshops and members' houses. In doing so, they provided support to one another, such as borrowing/lending money for urgent needs. Previously, families and relatives had provided such support. As one producer said, '[a]fter joining this activity [the OVOP Project], relations became more intense. I have many acquaintances'.

Producers' interactions were also extended beyond their general social circles, gender, and village boundaries. For instance, some producers' husbands became involved in the felt business. In one village, the husband of one producer made several moulds to make it easier to shape felt products. The use of moulds quickly spread among felt CBOs in the Issyk-Kul Oblast, which greatly helped in shaping products and speeding up production. Other producers' husbands also provided various forms of support, such as preparing wool, providing transportation to training sessions, and doing physical work to help renovate an abandoned primary school into a workshop.[6] According to one producer, the husbands of her CBO members said, 'this is their *jaamat* [group] and they work with this *jaamat*'. When the CBO members received their payments, they went out and celebrated together, including their husbands. Producers also began inviting fellow producers, who lived in different villages, for traditional ceremonies. These interactions outside existing kinship ties not only fostered collaborative work relationships but also contributed to the establishment of an informal support system of felt production within and between villages. Their expanded networks encouraged them to meet deadlines with the required quality and to act in a professional manner. These networks are different from the professional ones between apparel producers educated during the Soviet era identified by Botoeva and Spector (2013). However, in the process of working and having successful experiences, producers seemingly came to foster positive feelings regarding their capabilities and to develop the

[6] Bunn (2011, 508) points out that although women commonly practise felt making in Central Asia, there are instances in which men make felt and provide ideas, suggestions, and physical assistance.

'professionalism' that Sanghera and Iliasov (2008) identify among post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan professionals, such as doctors and lawyers.

At the same time, the changes brought about by the felt business resulted in the strengthening socio-economic power, to a certain extent, of the felt producers within their families and communities. Their felt work, along with its economic success, became well known in their villages and in their families, which, in turn, fostered feelings of respect for these women. Their children often expressed their pride in having mothers who were part of the felt business. As one teenage daughter said, '[m]y mom's status in the village is high. She helps women with work and helps them with learning'. One son in his early twenties expressed, 'my friends call me even from Karakol seeing her [my mother's] pictures in magazines and everywhere. I am proud of her, and I tell my friends that she makes such and such things'. Thus, the introduction of the felt business has contributed to raising the social status of felt producers—the women—in their normal environment.

5.3 Family support for the felt producers

To understand the experiences of the felt producers, it is necessary to investigate what made their socio-economic transformation possible after the introduction of the felt business. One male interviewee pointed out:

> The Kyrgyz people have a slightly different mentality. Husbands will normally rule [the family]. These are traditions that are mostly rigid. For people from outside, our traditions might look strange. By our tradition, males are the heads of our households. They are like the yurt's *tunduk* [top of the roof].

In this tradition, women had to follow their husbands and were responsible for doing most of the housework. However, the felt business brought some changes in such tradition. One of the leaders of the CBOs was criticised by some people: 'You [the leader] are disturbing my wife, who has

been home all this time' and 'pushing [my wife] to join the group and work'. She replied to such people by saying, '[t]he money is good here [the felt business]'. She said to me, '[p]eople are different, you know'. Under these circumstances, many producers had to negotiate with their families to allow them to participate in the felt business and find a new balance between paid and non-paid work.

One example of this case is a couple who were interviewed. A wife in her mid-thirties had a husband and children. After joining the felt business, she was condemned by other villagers, who said that '[s]he left the children to her husband'. This criticism was similar to what her husband had said to her when she repeatedly asked him to let her work at a felt workshop. When she consulted her husband about her participation in the business, 'he immediately asked me "Who will take care of the children?" I told him, "[m]aybe you look after the children, I will work until noon"'. At that time, she thought that she would be able to work at home in the afternoon until her children grew up. However, she realised that it was not appropriate to work at home while other people worked collectively in the workshop. In addition, her youngest child was still small and was having some problems. Therefore, after consulting her colleagues and negotiating with her husband, she had decided to work only certain hours every day (sometimes until noon). Once she had taken care of her children, she would rush to join the others and go to work. After one month, both the children and husband had gotten used to the new situation of her not being at home. Her husband eventually leant to give meals to the children and found that the youngest child had been fine with just him at home. By then, he allowed his wife to work until evening. The producer said, '[w]e aligned within one month'. At the time of the interview, the husband was even preparing dinners when she had to work until late at night.

I also interviewed the producer's husband, who was in his early forties. He said that he had not opposed her intention of working, as he had thought '[i]t is good to have money to meet the home budgets and needs'. He explained that he and his wife agreed that she would be able to work when the youngest child became two years old. He said, '[h]ow could I take care of a one-

year-old child?' One girl of their children sometimes washed dishes, which was a great help in allowing her mother to leave home on time. Although the husband said that his support to her was 'telling her not to be late to work and come home on time', he had already accepted her work as long as she did the housework that he could not do. During the interview, he repeatedly mentioned his wish to have a job that was suitable for men. Although he supported his wife's decision to work, he seemed to envy his wife, who was able to secure paid work for herself.

Similar to the case of the producer and her husband shown above, many interviewees expressed the importance of family support in allowing them to participate in the felt business. For instance, one producer in her early fifties lived with her husband, grown-up children, a daughter-in-law, and a grandchild. She explained how her family members had helped her:

> [M]y family members even created conditions for [supporting] my work. They have gotten used to my work. My husband understands the importance of my working. […] My husband does all the work outside: work in the field [and] looking after livestock and the youngest son helps him. The daughter-in-law takes care of the house. Everyone in the family has his/her responsibilities.

When the producer was busy in her felt work, her family members even helped her.

Another producer, who was in her early forties and lived with her husband, a parent-in-law, and children, faced difficulties when she was appointed as a technical leader in an area across several villages. She was responsible for teaching other producers and checking the quality of the products they were making. While in the middle of dealing with a huge order, other producers called her on the phone non-stop and visited her house from morning until night to ask her to check their products. As dictated by tradition, every visitor must be treated to tea, which resulted in disturbing her husband's work and stressing out her teenage daughter, who had to prepare tea many times. The producer said, 'the whole family felt discomfort. I had no time for the family and myself […] It was stressful for me too. For about two months my home was not like home'.

After this experience, the producer moved everything related to the felt work to a workshop in her village. However, her family, especially her daughter, still helped her to work. In fact, during our interview, the daughter served tea and even brought small plates (to put served snacks) because her mother had forgotten where they were in the kitchen. The fact that the producer did not know the location of the plates suggested that it was her daughter who regularly took responsibility for the kitchen work. The producer smilingly said, 'I am worrying if she [her daughter] finishes school and goes to study further [outside the village], what shall I do?'

One CBO leader, meanwhile, shared her knowledge of one notable case. One year ago, a woman had joined the CBO. The woman, who had six children, lived with her mother-in-law, who was unhappy about the woman's work. She complained about the situation in which the woman regularly left her children without care and neglected some housework. Despite the opposition from her mother-in-law, the woman chose to continue working for the CBO, since her husband only had seasonal work. The woman's family had to pay the university tuition fees of some of their children. The women had worked hard to make many products, which helped her to receive the biggest payment among the CBO members. After seeing the woman's economic gain, the mother-in-law soon called the CBO leader and even offered one of the rooms of her house to use as a workshop, saying, 'I [the mother-in-law] will take care of the children. Let her [the woman] work'. In the end, the mother-in-law became very supportive of the felt business, according to the leader.

Although most of the members of the felt CBOs were women, men sometimes joined and supported the felt business. A CBO leader in her mid-sixties proudly said that some husbands of the CBO members also became members. She had previously experienced the importance of family support, especially the support of husbands. For instance, in her CBO, one member stopped coming to their workshop. As the woman had returned home late due to a particular work schedule, her husband decided not to allow her to work at the workshop. Having such an experience, the leader said, '[w]hat shall we do if they do not support us?' The leader emphasised that she, for

instance, would not be able to undergo training in Bishkek or Karakol without the support of her husband and family. She added, 'I am working because people around [me] are supportive'.

Thus, the experiences of the felt producers clearly demonstrate that the socio-economic transformation brought about by the felt business is being supported by their family members. The decision made by these women to participate in the felt business was supported by the developed collaboration with their family members, which was created through tenacious negotiation and bolstered by the proven contribution to the household economy.

6. Sustainability of women's choices and empowerment

The exploration of the experiences of felt producers reveals some complexities behind their decision, or 'choice', to participate in the felt business. After independence, traditional values, such as gender roles, that had been concealed under the Soviet system, in which men and women both 'worked' for the Soviet Union, were uncovered. Thus, during the transition, the people had to find alternative ways to cope with new, but old, issues surrounding gender roles.

One woman in her mid-forties, who lived with her husband and four children, said, '[w]hen the workshop is launched, you get in good mood, you want to work. […] Previously, when I was at home, I kept cleaning the house. And the cleaning never ends as it restarts the next day. But this job [the felt work] is a real job'. For her, as well as many other producers, the paid work created by the felt business has more values than daily, 'non-paid' housework. Her choice of being a felt producer is supported by external factors, such as the establishment of a workshop, her husband's support, and her newly found skills in creating felt products that can pass international standards.

Although the participation of many producers is facilitated by their families' support, such family collaboration rests on a delicate balance. This is because some male interviewees often emphasised their conditions when they accepted and supported their wives' paid work. For

instance, the husband of the couple mentioned in the previous section wholeheartedly expected his wife to still do the housework. Another man in his late forties stated:

> They [producers] may work for 10-15 days very intensively then for a week, two weeks they are at home. They are not working all month long or the whole year round. They wait for the next order to come for about 10 days, and if they are very busy, we, husbands, do all the work about the house.

Responding to the question about how he would feel if his wife had regular work, he clearly admitted his unwillingness to entertain the idea, saying that:

> Generally, I am not against her working, but it will not be quite good for rural areas. In cities—yes, everyone has to work. In villages, we have a lot to do at home. We have a plot of land in which to plant crops, we have livestock, and as I have to go on missions, one of us should be at home. Only for that reason and not because I am against [it], would I prefer her not to have a regular job.

These words suggest that his support for his wife depended on the extent to which her work would cause great interruptions to their ordinary lifestyle. A sixty-year-old man also emphasised that the main income source of a household was farming (e.g. crops and livestock) and women's incomes were only additional funds for the sake of the whole household. He said:

> They [women] get interested because they are making additional income, as they are not always busy in the field, and they are not always working in CBOs. Sometimes they work at home, sometimes they work at the workshop [for temporary orders], but they do not work all the time.

However, some men already accepted their wives' participation in the business, since there were only a few paid jobs available for men. One husband in his early forties clearly stated:

> I did not oppose her [his wife's] intention. In general, it is good to work. [It] would be good for us males to have a job. It is good to have money to meet the home budget and needs. [It] would be good for us to have a job, too. Is there a vacancy?

The socio-economic values highlighted by these men represent the reality that many producers face within their households and communities. In particular, men only allowed their wives to work if the changes brought about by the felt business would not threaten their traditional values and lifestyles. The husband in his early forties years who asked about 'a vacancy'—he wished to have a job—wanted paid work. He (and probably other men) might have been jealous of his wife who had access to money that he did not have. The men's words above hardly show respect for the women's socially elevated status that was expressed by the children. Perhaps the husbands might have thought that the status supported by the felt business would only be temporary. Although their perspectives might not represent those of all male villagers, such perspectives certainly existed as local responses to the changes brought about by the business. It can be assumed that the wives also know of, or at least have feelings about, these men's (and probably other male villagers') thoughts and the uncertainty of the continuation of the felt business.

The circumstances surrounding felt producers are intricate. Some live with their husbands, their children, their own parents, parents-in-law, grandparents, grandparents-in-law, grandchildren, and/or other relatives in the Issyk-Kul Oblast. Their family members may be working or studying in Karakol, Bishkek, and/or Russia. When parents work in Bishkek, grandparents and grandchildren might live together in the villages. The grandparents take care of their grandchildren, a relationship that might be reversed later, as the latter are expected to provide care for the former. As Hobson (2011, 159) finds in her study in Europe, '[w]ith the dramatic rise in women's labor force and ensuing care deficit, family support networks have become important for WLB [work-life-balance] strategies'. In the case of Kyrgyz households, such family support

networks seem to spread more spatially than what people in other countries would assume. For instance, to realise their participation in paid work outside the home, felt producers have to consult their family members, who may be away from home, and make necessary arrangements within and beyond their families. As with such arrangements, they exercise the 'social technology' (Sen 1990) that they have (or create), including, for instance, their family members' skills in managing housework to overcome obstacles preventing the producers from joining the business. For those who used to work at, for instance, garment factories in Bishkek, such arrangements might be easier since the workshops were located within their villages.

In the arena of international development, the improvement of women's incomes is often associated with their empowerment. However, women's empowerment is multi-dimensional and cannot be separated from the specific circumstances surrounding their lives and their unpaid housework. Existing studies in various countries indicate the importance of considering external factors, together with access to money and consequential enhanced capabilities, or what Sen (1993) calls 'alternative combinations of functionings'. As mentioned previously, Endeley's (2001) study on two societies in Cameroon reveals that women's empowerment cannot be achieved only through access to money. Endeley (2001, 39) states that 'men are the ultimate beneficiaries' unless women's access to money is connected to their control of money or status in their households or communities. In a garment factory in Bangladesh, Ahmed (2004) finds that the incomes gained from factory work are needed for their households, while the women who produce them, especially married ones, rarely have decision-making power in family affairs. The study of Kulb et al. (2016) on a community-based microcredit model in Kenya reveals that women's empowerment is related to local assets (e.g. the growth of group funds, talents of individuals, and social capital) and capabilities within group members accumulated through activities. Similarly, studies on Kyrgyzstan also present diverse aspects of women's empowerment. A report on social impact brought about by a microfinance programme in Kyrgyzstan finds that the influence of the programme on the welfare of households was modest and restricted by

prevalent gender norms and power balances; for instance, due to a programme design that requires cooperation between spouses, most of the loans were used for livestock breeding, which is traditionally controlled by men (Ngo 2008). Kim et al. (2018) investigate a development project that aims to empower women through income generating activities by using crop agriculture in a village in Naryn Province. They find 'organized gender injustice', which results in the sacrifice of the women's lives (e.g. time, health, emotions) and the exclusion of unfit women for various reasons, such as religion and lack of resources (Kim et al. 2018).

My study has proven that felt producers accumulated local assets and capabilities in collaboration with fellow producers within and beyond their workshops. They fostered social capital not only among themselves but also with others, such as community members, village administrators, AO office staff, and even Mayors, through cooperation for the development of their activities (e.g. arranging and providing facilities and workshops). However, in places where men are traditionally considered decision-makers who control their households, it remains uncertain to what extent the women can control their earned money. Their economic power is uncertain: 'Intra-household inequality is common in developing countries and often distinctly gendered' (Iversen 2003, 110). Iversen (2003, 110) warns researchers and policymakers who aim to improve people's well-being through the development of capacities, to consider both the target people *and* their spouses. Kim et al. (2018) also point out the necessity of considering the heterogeneity of women and their lives, as well as the social, economic, and cultural circumstances in which they live, when designing a development programme.

When felt producers want to decide on something about their lives, for instance their participation in the felt business, they are forced to seek new combinations of their functionings that they would be able to attain and retain. In doing so, the producers, as well as their families, develop their capabilities by experimenting and observing 'vectors of functionings' (Sen 1992), just like how the couple mentioned earlier adopted their new lifestyle after a trial period of one month. The wife was able to exercise her freedom to choose to join the felt business once her

husband and children had learnt to cope with her choice without much sacrifice of their happiness. Giving women freedom to be able to work outside their homes might also facilitate their freedom from hunger, illness, and poverty (Sen 1999, 194). Their agency can contribute to changing their households and societies at large (Sen 1999, 189-203). Their participation in the felt business certainly improved the quality of the lives led by the producers and their families. However, the producers' capabilities as combinations of functionings were achieved under their specific spatio-temporal circumstances. For instance, the wife had to wait until her youngest child turned two years old. Her work was supported by her fellow producers in the workshop, which provided a space not only for sharing knowledge and skills in making felt products, but also for knowing their families' circumstances and collaborating to fulfil their respective family responsibilities. These all supported the wife to evaluate the balance among and change a vector of her functionings. As Hobson (2011) suggests, any changes in the individual, environmental, and social factors surrounding the wife in the future would influence the combination of her functionings, which she achieved at the time of the interview. In other words, the enduring of women's capabilities depends on whether they would be able to find alternative combinations of their functionings in their changing work and life trajectories.

There are diverse types of functionings, all of which influence women's lives. According to Sen (1993, 31):

> Some functionings are very elementary, such as being adequately nourished, being in good health, etc., and these may be strongly valued by all, for obvious reasons. Others may be more complex, but still widely valued, such as achieving self-respect or being socially integrated.

Most of the interviewed felt producers seemingly had both elementary and complex functionings, which they established through the felt work. It can be said that the felt business increased such functionings among the participants. The exercising of gained knowledge and skills helped the

producers improve the living standards that they aimed to have. Chatting with fellow producers became a kind of therapy for many producers, who had only previously stayed at home, thus, supporting their mental health. In addition, the contribution to the economy of each household through the paid work made them gain respect from both their family and community members, which enhanced their self-respect. The producers gained the feeling of achievement and satisfaction by being recognised for their ability to earn money, which they had not been able to have by just being a housewife looking after their children and elderly parents.

At the same time, the women obtained physical and social mobility through the business. For some producers, who had joined based on the expectation of doing something different in their lives rather than on pure economic needs, participation in the business was fun and a kind of leisure activity as the vignette indicates. All these effects of the felt business resulted in enhancing the women's happiness, self-respect, and dignity, which make up their complex functionings. The combinations of these diverse functionings form the capabilities of the felt producers, which enable them to achieve the lives that they choose.

However, it is worth noting that the producers' capabilities as the combination of functionings would not be evaluated separately from the other peoples' combinations. Their capabilities that were expanded by the paid work, which helped them achieve (or be achieving) their chosen lives, are constantly exposed to and influenced by external elements, such as their family members and communities. For instance, if the teenage daughter who served tea for guests and did all the housework left the village to study at a university, the producer would not be able to have the same capability that she achieved before her daughter left. The individual economic and/or non-economic reasons that drove women to participate in the felt business would also change in the course of their lives. Thus, during their life trajectories, they have to find the best combinations of functionings for themselves, their families, and their communities. Moreover, in villages, there were also those who were excluded from the business. As one leader described, some women were unable to work without the consent/support of their families and some were

not capable of making felt products even if their families allowed them to work. As the leader said, 'both good and bad happen. I cannot say things here [the workshop of her village] are perfect'. Women have agency and can choose whether they should engage in the felt business in accordance with their circumstances, including their skills. As observed and heard during the fieldwork, those women, who do not have enough skills to make felt products of international quality sell their products in domestic markets or participate in other businesses, such as sewing clothes. However, if the exclusion from the business supported by the project causes social and economic disparity and conflicts within the community, such social changes would affect and might even reduce the capabilities of the producers. As stated above, my status as a research fellow at the JICA Research Institute at the time of the fieldwork helped me gain respondents' trust to some extent. However, I assume that it also made them hesitate to share their (and others') negative experiences for fear that this feedback would harm the project. This would be due to their expectation of continuing the project and their desire to be seen as performing well during JICA interviews. Thus, the current study is not free from such biases and certainly has limitations.

The importance of considering changing circumstances can be observed in the preference of workplaces among the felt producers. Many interviewees pointed out the importance of workshops, which provided comfortable spaces for working and exchanging information on both work-related and personal issues. As mentioned above, working at such workshops enhanced their feeling of doing a 'real job', which resulted in fostering their self-esteem and respect. In workshops, they could play different roles, rather than just being wives, mothers, and/or carers at home. However, a certain number of the producers expressed their preference for the convenience of working at home. Some were unable to gain any support from their families, some had babies or elderly parents or parents-in-law, and some lived far away from the workshops.

In addition, not all villages had workshops and not all workshops provided decent working environments. For instance, some workshops did not have sufficient equipment, including heating systems. During winter, when the temperature often drops below zero

centigrade, the producers faced difficulties in making felt products at workshops, especially those made using the wet technique, without heating. By staying and working at home, they could use heating or at least hot water to warm themselves.[7] When they had to work until late at night to meet a deadline, they also preferred to work at home. Nevertheless, their different preferences would shift from time to time depending on their life courses and given circumstances. For instance, some producers used to work at home when their children were small and eventually started working at workshops after their children became a little bigger. On the other hand, there are those who worked at a workshop but shifted to making products at home after giving birth.

All these things affect the felt producers' freedom to choose the best combinations of their functionings at a particular time in their lives. The paid work brought about by the felt business enhanced their capabilities by providing choices that could change their lives and consequently empowered them. At the time of the fieldwork, the interviewed producers had a sort of freedom to choose their preferred (or possible) work styles in the flexible system of the felt business with the support provided by the project in collaboration with MUJI. Such flexibility enabled them to participate in the business by maintaining a work-life balance, which contributed to their empowerment. In other words, if the business system threatens the sensitive balance of women's work and lives in the villages, the women could not participate in the business. In this case, without being able to find good combinations of functionings, they would not be able to exercise their choices and maintain their capabilities to the level expected by the project. The case of the felt business clearly suggests that women's empowerment through paid work has to be considered with other elements of their lives, such as non-paid housework, relationships with family and community members, physical facilities, and the business system in their respective circumstances. Indeed, women live and work in time and space, in which economic and non-economic aspects are inseparably intermingled.

[7] As mentioned above, some CBO leaders negotiated with their rural community governments to seek support for establishing their workshops with proper equipment. In the three villages I visited, the workshops were still being prepared.

JICA's collaboration with MUJI happened to start during one of the OVOP projects that aimed to establish a sustainable system for regional development through community empowerment by using the OVOP movement (JICA 2011). The case is only part of the OVOP project. From a gender perspective, the findings reveal the intricate impacts of the felt business on women's lives. Future projects and programmes that desire to empower vulnerable people through business approaches should carefully consider the delicate balance between economic and non-economic benefits among the target population. As Rai et al. (2019) demonstrate, the incompatibility between SDG's Goal 8, 'full employment and decent work', and Goal 5, 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls', means that the promotion of one goal would not lead to the realisation of multiple goals (including the one particular goal), as well as the SDGs' final goal of creating a sustainable society due to the interconnected issues across all goals. Economic growth through the business approach is not a panacea to support women (not all, though) to improve their lives. Therefore, it is vital to pay more attention to the socio-cultural issues surrounding people's lives, which are hard to see from the outside and tend to be less highlighted in projects and programmes.

7. Conclusion

Can the creation of paid work, or 'full and productive employment and decent work' according to the SDGs, and the consequent economic growth increase and sustain the choices of women and empower them? The case of the felt business in Kyrgyzstan reveals the personalised choices of the participating women. There is no doubt that the felt business provided these women with a precious opportunity to become paid workers. The producers whom I interviewed gained both economic (e.g. income) and non-economic (e.g. self-respect) benefits through their participation. These benefits led them to exert ownership in their lives and families by following three principles: 'the importance of options' (e.g. access to employment and credit, land rights, and

literacy), '[t]he importance of perceived contribution to the well-being of the household', and '[t]he importance of a sense of one's own worth' (Nussbaum 2000, 283-290). The paid work consequently enhanced women's capabilities and empowerment to a certain extent.

However, individuals' choices in their lives are continually affected by the '[h]eterogeneity of factors that influence individual advantage', since there is not 'one homogeneous thing (such as "income" or "utility")' (Sen 1999, 77). Individuals have their own prioritised needs and preferred lives in specific circumstances in any society. Their reasons and circumstances, which encourage and enable them to join the business, respectively, are varied. In the case of the Kyrgyz felt business, the support of their families was critical for them to work. Their chosen activities requiring a new synergy between work and life at the time of the interviews was realised on the basis of the individual, fragile sets of factors surrounding their lives. Such heterogeneous influences on individuals' choices should not be ignored in evaluating the outcomes of development projects and initiatives. For instance, BCtA has set several criteria for its member companies. One of the criteria is 'to generate measurable results' (BCtA n.d.-b, 2). It might be indispensable for the BCtA and its multilateral alliance members, such as donor governments and the UNDP (and its member companies) to present the visible, recognisable results as evidence for the justification and value of the activities they support. However, placing too much emphasis on the 'measurable results' might create the risk of overlooking and inaccurately measuring heterogeneous socio-cultural influences on the 'quantitative and qualitative targets for the expected business and development outcomes' (BCtA n.d.-b, 2).

At the time of the fieldwork, there were few visible, recognisable negative elements that might disadvantage the participants, families, and communities. The IFC's survey (2021, 22-23) among the producers who worked with MUJI highlights that the project helped their empowerment by providing opportunities to work as professionals and produce global standard products. According to the report (IFC 2021, 23), 'work with OVOP+1, which was mostly home-based or done in small workshops, enabled women to maintain a balance of care and work,

consistent with traditional Kyrgyz culture and identities'. My data from the interviews also indicate that the felt business economically and socially benefitted those who participated in it. However, it is worth noting that the respondents of IFC's survey were those who participated in the project, and most of my interviewees were also its participants and their family members. Among the observed positive impacts, however, this analysis suggests that potential and hidden threats are also present. For instance, the traditional values related to gender roles were expressed by the respondents, particularly by some male interviewees. There were also some women who had been excluded from the business due to the lack of felt-making skills, family support, and so on. And there was also a CBO leader who had moved to Karakol for the education of her children. This change probably weakened the capacities of the other members of her CBO, since the former leader had shown strong leadership to form it and collaborate with other producers in neighbouring villages. It is also difficult to judge the expansion of the producers' choices and empowerment by simply looking at particular moments of their lives, as their capabilities are inseparable from and deeply linked to their changing needs and those of their families as well as their surrounding circumstances. The felt business in the Issyk-Kul Oblast has developed under the OVOP Project with the active involvement of MUJI. The OVOP Project is slated to continue until January 2023, which would also influence the business model and cooperation with stakeholders, including business partners, such as MUJI. This constant change might increase or decrease the volume and value of paid work and could certainly influence women's capabilities in the future. To understand the long-term influences of this business model on society, further research is required, since the choices made by individuals are an endless activity in their lives. While the sustainability of empowerment is difficult to judge, continued observation, even snapshot-like ones as here, will facilitate understanding.

Highlighting the importance of recognising the more negative impacts of women's participation in paid work, Koggel (2003, 179-180) states that '[w]omen's freedom and agency are not always improved when they enter the workforce, and merely increasing women's

workforce participation is not an adequate development policy'. In turn, Nussbaum (2000, 290) thinks that 'women who have dignity and self-respect can help to fashion types of community that are no less loving, and often quite a lot more loving, than those they have known before'. It might be difficult to prove the adequacy of her belief. However, the case of the Kyrgyz felt business suggests the fact that being part of a workforce while balancing non-paid work fostered dignity and self-respect among the women. Their self-respect seemingly encouraged them to have ideas for the further improvement of their lives and communities. For instance, one of the producers expressed her hope for transforming a workshop into a factory and having permanent jobs. Another producer dreamed of becoming an entrepreneur by involving her family in the business, in which she would make products ordered by MUJI. She said, '[t]he main thing is to have permanent [consistent] orders'. These words at least partially present the development of the women's ownership of their lives, while it can also be seen that they wish to have external support that would lead to self-help efforts and not aid from donors. Their empowerment is on the way. While an inclusive business approach might not be a perfect tool to empower individuals through economic growth, nevertheless, without the accumulation of small changes in society, a sustainable society without inequality and poverty would not be realised. It is necessary for donors, as well as recipient countries, to keep eyes on the ways in which women will, or will not, exercise and adjust their expanded choices to their changing circumstances even after the support of external entities ends.

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Appendix 1: Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BCtA	Business Call to Action
CBO	community based organization
GDP	gross domestic product
IFC	International Finance Corporation
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan
MUJI	A brand name of Ryohin Keikaku Co., Ltd.
NGO	non-governmental organisation
ODA	official development assistance
OVOP	One Village One Product
OVOP Association	Union of Juridical Entities Association One Village One Product
OVOP+1	Public Union OVOP+1
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIAR	SIAR research and consulting
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Source: Author.

Appendix 2: Breakdown of the interviewees

Category	Male	Female	Total
OVOP staff members	2	6*	8
Felt producers	0	28	28
Felt producers' family (husbands)	13	0	13
Felt producers' family (others)	1	1	2
Felt producers' family (children)**	1	2	3
Other producers (e.g. food, soap)	1	3	4
Other producers' family (wife)	0	1	1
Other producers' family (children)**	0	1	1
Village head	3	0	3
AO head/staff member	3	1	4
Villagers (excluding those shown above)	5	0	5
JOCV (Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers)	1	3	4
Total	30	46	76

* Including those who make samples of felt products.
** The interviews with children were conducted in the presence of their parent(s).
Note: Three group interviews were also conducted among felt producers.
Source: Author.

Abstract (in Japanese)

要約

この十数年、国際開発において、支援対象の人々のエンパワメントおよび不平等や貧困のない持続可能な社会の実現を目指して民間セクターとの協働が加速している。既存研究によると、有給の仕事は、選択できる機会やライフスタイルの拡大を通じて、女性など脆弱な人々をエンパワメントするとされている。しかし、経済的（例：収入）・非経済的（例：エンパワメント）利益の間の相互関係はインクルーシブ・ビジネスに関する先行研究がもてはやすほど簡単ではない。

本論文では、国際協力機構（JICA）が日本の製造小売会社と協働しながらキルギス共和国で支援している開発プロジェクトの事例を考察している。協働により構築されたフェルト事業は、イシククル湖周辺に点在する村で何百人もの女性を生産者として巻き込んできている。地元の利害関係者、特にフェルト生産者とその家族へのインタビューに基づくデータの分析を通して、ビジネスによってもたらされる経済的・非経済的要因、および生産者、家族、コミュニティ全体への影響を明らかにした。有給の仕事で得た金銭的利益により、生産者は家計に貢献することができ、自尊心を高めることにも繋がっていた。その一方で、ビジネスに参加するという女性の選択が、夫の理解を含む家族の支援の有無など個々の状況に依存していることも示された。本論文は、女性の選択とエンパワメントの形成と維持は、女性の生活における経済的側面と非経済的側面の間の複雑な関係によって影響を受けるため、ビジネスアプローチの開発への適用には可能性と限界の両方があることを示唆している。

キーワード: インクルーシブ・ビジネス、女性、選択肢、エンパワメント、ケイパビリティ、キルギス

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