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Aims and overview of the mentorship program for women entrepreneurs offered by Opportunity International Malawi

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The aim of this report is to describe one of the programs offered by Opportunity International Malawi, the peer-to-peer mentorship program for women entrepreneurs. To gain a comprehensive overview of the program, its target group, and impacts, we studied the documents by Opportunity International Malawi and conducted interviews with representatives of the NGO as well as 16 women entrepreneurs in March 2020 who are currently joining or have joined this program.

Opportunity International Malawi

In Malawi, over half of the population lives below the national poverty line, and more than 70% of the population has to survive with less than \$1.90 a day (World Bank, 2018).

Opportunity International Malawi is a non-profit organisation whose main purpose is to reduce extreme poverty in Malawi. It functions as an implementing member of Opportunity International Inc., which operates in 22 countries worldwide. Opportunity International Malawi implements education and training programs that aim to create sustainable change by enabling marginalized people to learn skills that can help them to autonomously move out of poverty. For example, they run an education program for Malawian farmers to help them deal with changing agricultural demands and they offer training to refugees in Malawi to promote their financial independence. Another one of Opportunity International Malawi's projects is a peer-to-peer mentorship program, which aims to empower women entrepreneurs through a community-based approach.

Peer-to-peer mentorship program

Opportunity International Malawi offers a peer-to-peer mentorship program to women entrepreneurs which includes two main activities, peer-to-peer-education and business training for both mentors and mentees. The ultimate aim is to economically (i.e., develop an income generating activity) and socially (i.e., strengthen the position of women in the family and community) empower women in Malawi (for a definition of empowerment see Huis, Hansen, Otten, & Lensink, 2017). Below, the program and its envisioned impacts are described in more detail (see Figure 1 for the Theory of Change that illustrates how this program should achieve its goals).

Target group

'Without a man, many Malawian women cannot buy food' - Olivia¹ explains the position of Malawian women who do not have an income-generating activity.

Women are an especially vulnerable group in Malawi. Financial dependency on their husbands puts them in a weak position and makes them susceptible to domestic violence

¹ Participant of Opportunity International Malawi's peer-to-peer mentorship program. *Note:* We may have slightly adjusted quotes in the translation and transcription process. We choose different names to guarantee anonymity of the participants.



(Bonnes, 2016). Opportunity International Malawi's peer-to-peer mentorship program targets the economically active but marginalized women in rural and semi-urban parts of Malawi. It aims to help these women attain financial independence by providing them with necessary tools to make their businesses thrive.

Activities

1. Participants

'She came to my business and asked me how it was going' – Sylvia explains how she met her mentor.

The peer-to-peer mentorship program offered by Opportunity International Malawi aims to build sustainable relationships between mentors and mentees so that they can trust each other and openly share knowledge and experience. Selecting the new women for the program is a collaborative effort between both Opportunity International Malawi and its members. Firstly, Opportunity identifies women with experience in business who can take on the role of a mentor. Usually, these are women who have already participated as a mentee in the peer-to-peer mentorship program and have successfully completed the business training in the past. This mentor can nominate three women in her community who can use help in starting up or running a business. When the program ends, mentees are invited to become a mentor themselves, and transfer what they have learned to other women. In this way, Opportunity International Malawi aims to create a learning cycle in which skills and knowledge can continuously be transferred and have a sustainable impact on the communities.

2. Peer-to-peer education

'My mentor always welcomes me into her house, she is very humble' – Melina.

Opportunity International Malawi suggests that mentors and mentees meet twice a month. The pairs then decide together what best fits their own needs. During these meetings, they give each other advice, exchange business ideas, and discuss matters concerning business management, such as customer care and record keeping. Interviews with the women who joined the program offered further insights. Most women stated that they do not only talk about business-related matters, but that they often confide in each other about their families and spirituality as well. Several women reported to also meet each other in addition to the bimonthly formal meetings; women spontaneously visit each other's houses or businesses.

3. Monthly business trainings

'The business trainings help women learn a lot, yes they are important' - Charmaine.

In addition to the peer-to-peer education, Opportunity International Malawi also offers mentors and mentees monthly business trainings. The program includes 12 training sessions on different topics. During these interactive trainings, women gain knowledge and improve their skills with respect to financial literacy, business management, record keeping, and customer care. The trainings offer the space for women to share their experience and ideas. While the course material is new to the mentees, for the mentors the trainings function as a refresher course. To support women to join these meetings and promote active participation, women receive booklets and pens, and their travel expenses are covered. After having



attended all 12 training sessions, mentees receive a certificate of their participation and successful completion of the course.

Impacts

1. Short- and long-term impacts

After hearing how her mentor went from begging for salt to being a successful businesswoman, Mary felt an increase in her own drive to work hard.

The business trainings, the peer-to-peer education, and the relationships that lie at their basis, are aimed to affect the women's lives in various ways. The program intends to promote greater entrepreneurial success by increasing women's feelings of self-efficacy (Urban, 2012) as well as their business knowledge and skills. During in-depth interviews, women indeed described that their peers function as role models and inspiration, which increased their feelings of confidence in their own abilities. Several women mentioned that they have improved their business skills after participating in the program. Amongst others, women reported that they started keeping better track of their expenditures and interacting more positively with their customers. Overall, all women mentioned that they managed to increase their business profits after having followed the program (for more details see van Cong, Hansen, & Langley, 2020a).

'My fellow women have become my sisters' – Amelia.

One of the main purposes of the program offered by Opportunity International Malawi is to encourage women to support each other, as increased social support can promote women's social capital, feelings of relatedness, and business success (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Khavul, Bruton & Wood, 2009). In all interviews, which we conducted, mentors and mentees indeed help each other in the business domain with advice and with more tangible assistance. It is not uncommon for women to help each other financially in difficult times, or to promote each other's products. Women reported that the support also stretches into other domains of life, such as the emotional care they give each other when trying to find the balance between entrepreneurship and family life. Women expressed that they benefit greatly from the support they feel from their peers.

2. Ultimate impacts

Jade explains why she feels good about being a mentor: 'Because I am helping other women become independent'.

Ultimately, the program's goal is to promote empowerment in two domains. Firstly, women participating in the peer-to-peer mentorship program should create new networks of relationships, which should foster women's social empowerment. Further, women should increase their social capital and improve their businesses, which should promote their economic empowerment. Taken together, the program aims to increase women's levels of independence and thus reduce their vulnerable position in the household and community. During the interviews, women reported that their participation in the program has improved their social and financial situation and their feelings of being empowered.



Theory of change

Working with the strong organising framework of the Theory of Change can improve program design, implementation, evaluation and learning (Vogel, 2012).

Opportunity International Malawi has developed the peer-to-peer mentorship training based on a theory of change, which explains how the different activities should result in the envisioned ultimate impacts. This theory is based on psychological and economic scientific knowledge and experience from their daily work (see Figure 1).

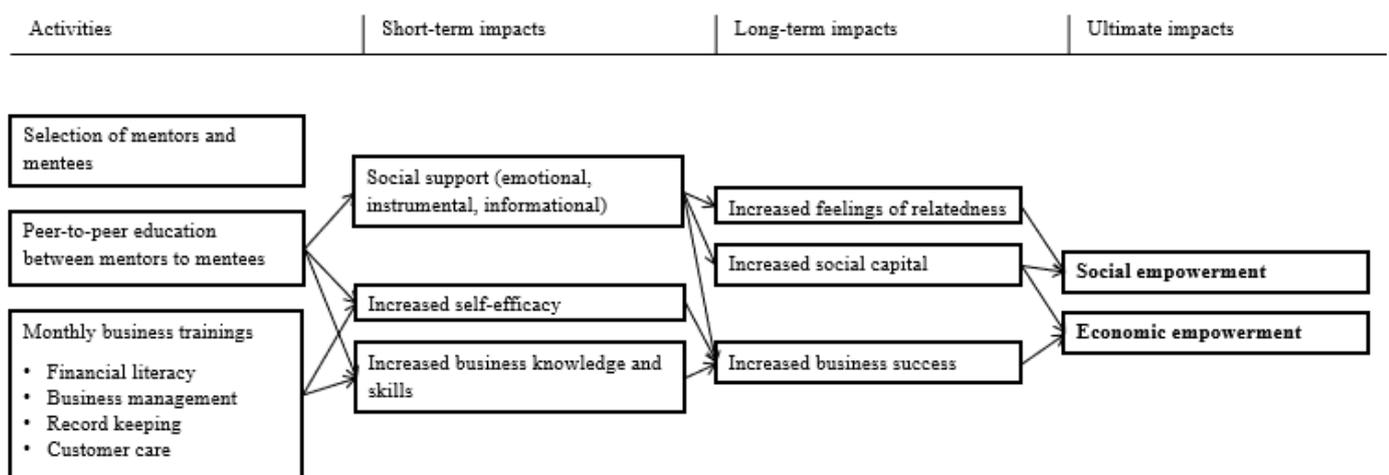


Figure 1. Theory of Change flow diagram describing how Opportunity International Malawi’s peer-to-peer mentorship program aims to socially and economically empower women.

Evaluation of program

‘Thank you for coming to my house and hearing my story’ – Tamanda.

To monitor women’s progress and experiences, Opportunity International Malawi ensures frequent checks-up with women who participate in the peer-to-peer mentorship program. They visit their workplace or home and talk to them at the monthly business trainings. All participating women are expected to document their meeting times and the lessons they have learned during the meetings. Recently, in collaboration with the University of Groningen, Opportunity International Malawi conducted in-depth qualitative and quantitative research to learn more about the experience of the women and use this systematic evidence to further adapt the mentoring program to the needs of the women they aim to empower.

Collaboration partners

Opportunity International Malawi works together with various societal and governmental organizations, who support and fund their projects. The main partners of the mentorship program are VisionFund Malawi and Sunrise Ministries.



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