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Empowering women, enriching forests in the Amazon

The role of collective microenterprises

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“Together we rise. Women’s collective microenterprises in the Amazon aren’t just transforming lives; they’re reshaping futures and fostering sustainable communities for generations to come.”

Woman leader of the Alto Pindorama association, Pará State

Introduction

In the Brazilian Amazon, women's collective microenterprises are crucial for economic empowerment, transforming the socio-economic landscape. These enterprises enhance women's financial autonomy and address gender inequalities, fostering community resilience and sustainability (Benería and Sen, 1982). By pooling resources and sharing knowledge, women in these collective enterprises gain increased access to economic resources, which leads to improved household income and living conditions (Sherman, 2006).

The Amazon, rich in cultural diversity, is home to many Indigenous and traditional communities that face significant socio-economic challenges. Despite comprising over 1.5 million people in the amazon region (IBGE,

2024), they have access to less than 0.1% of available credit (Souza and de Albuquerque, 2023), an 8% illiteracy rate, and ten times less access to university education than other regions do (IBGE, 2024). Collective microenterprises present a powerful solution to these issues (Bullough, 2006; Sathiabama, 2010). These initiatives also enhance non-material aspects of empowerment, such as self-esteem, bargaining power and relational dynamics.

Previous studies, such as those by Chen (1997) and Kaur et al. (2007), have established a framework for understanding empowerment as a multi-dimensional process, leading to better decision-making within families, increased financial independence, and stronger community participation. Women's involvement in economic activities is recognized as a pathway to greater agency and equality, affirming their essential role in rural development (Bryman, 2016). In this way, women emerge as leaders in and advocates for broader community issues, fostering a culture of empowerment throughout the Amazon.

This research enriches the understanding of how collective microenterprises affect women's economic empowerment, emphasizing their role as new economic agents. By integrating social and environmental variables within their entrepreneurial frameworks, these microenterprises act as catalysts for broader community transformation (CIFOR, 2013). This comprehensive perspective highlights the multifaceted benefits of microenterprise participation and underscores the importance of integrating economic, social and environmental considerations into development strategies aimed at fostering gender equality and sustainable growth.

New lens to look at women's empowerment in tropical forest regions

This article discusses a study (Mello, 2014) that consisted of interviews with women who participate in economic initiatives in two states in the Brazilian Amazon: Acre, with supportive policies for forest management (forest policy as well as incentives for small-scale forest management such

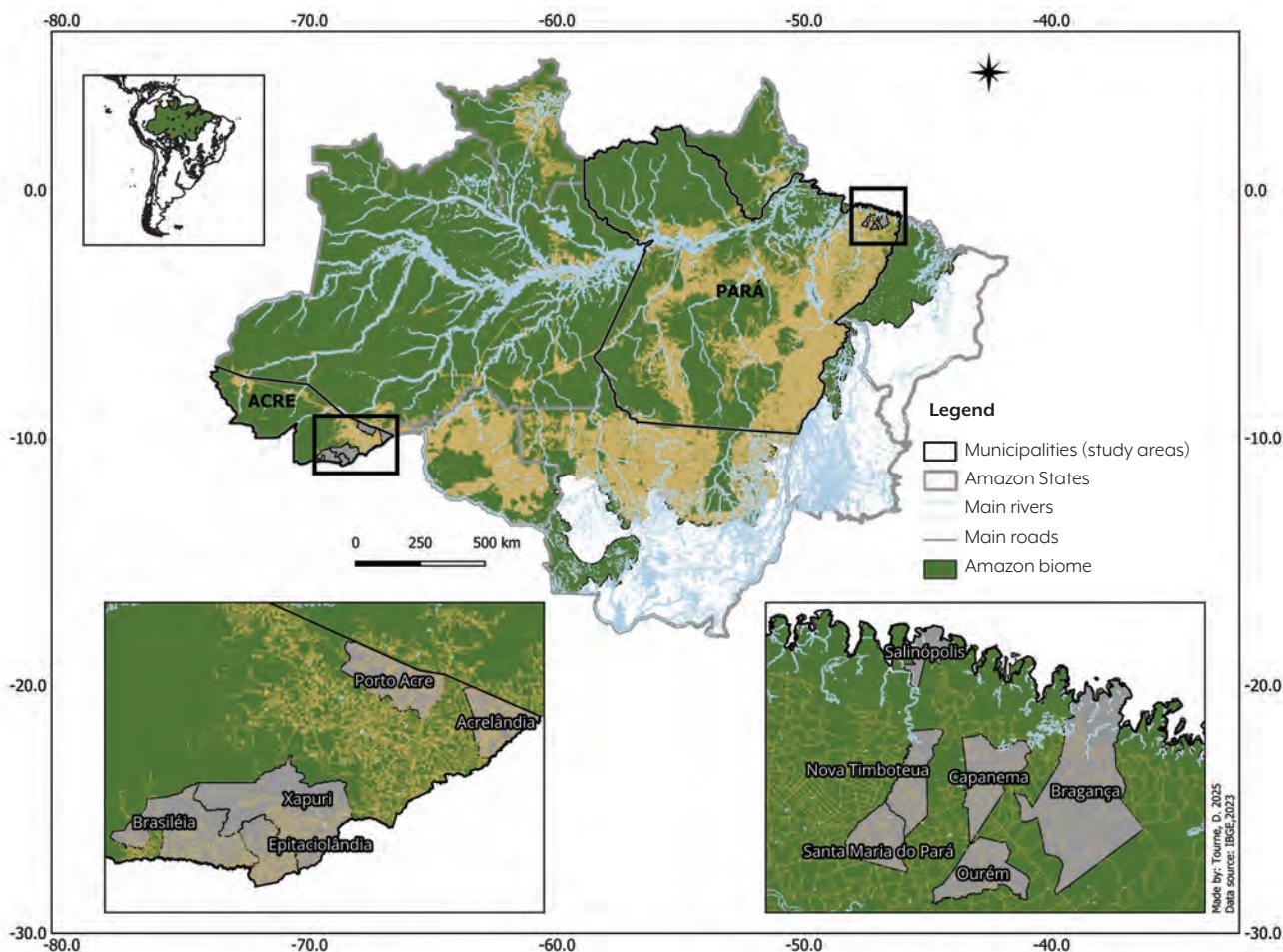


Figure 1. Case study location in the Brazilian states of Acre and Pará

Source: Daiana Tourne

as credit, technical assistance) and Pará, with grassroots initiatives (Figure 1). These contrasting approaches offer insights into community-led efforts and their impact on women's empowerment. Through interviews with 65 participants from 11 collective microenterprise groups – selected for their connections to women's organizations, sustainable practices and accessibility – the research highlights the material, cognitive, perceptual and relational changes these initiatives foster. These changes enhance individual agency and collective dynamics.

The study adopted a multifaceted approach to economic empowerment, integrating theoretical frameworks that highlight four dimensions: material, cognitive, perceptual and relational (Mello, 2014). This comprehensive perspective is crucial for understanding the complex nature of empowerment in the Amazon context:

1. Material dimension: This focuses on women's access to and control over financial resources and physical assets. Indicators include women's contribution to the household income from microenterprises and ownership of material capital such as land and productive assets.
2. Cognitive dimension: This examines the improvement of women's knowledge and skills. It's measured through participation in training programmes and women's increased awareness of their environment.
3. Perceptual dimension: This explores changes in women's self-esteem and self-confidence. It's evaluated through women's assessment of their income, relationships, freedom and roles in society. The psychological impact of this empowerment often leads to women mentoring others, creating a ripple effect in the community.
4. Relational dimension: This aspect examines changes in women's bargaining power and decision-making. Additionally, women's participation in microenterprises enhances their representation in community organizations and decision-making bodies.

This framework is useful to analyze the changes observed in women's empowerment process through microenterprise participation (Figure 2). First, change is experienced in access to and/or control over material resources and in level of income, satisfaction of basic needs, or earning capacity. In addition, women participants in microenterprises increase their knowledge as well as awareness of their environment. Gradually

they perceive more about their own individuality, interests and value – in effect, their self-esteem rises, as well as it is hoped, the positive perceptions of others of their contributions and worth. Eventually, they can bargain more effectively for more equal or less exploitative relationships within their family and community (Mello, 2014).

Economic empowerment through microenterprises

Transformative changes across four dimensions

The involvement of rural women in collective microenterprises within the Brazilian Amazon has sparked profound economic empowerment, evident through material, cognitive, perceptual and relational changes (Mello 2014). These complementary dimensions illustrate how microenterprise participation transforms not only individual lives but also broader community dynamics.

Material dimension

At the core of economic empowerment is the material dimension, which involves women's increased access to and control over financial resources and physical assets. The 65 women engaged in microenterprises reported significant income gains, with family earnings ranging from USD 272 to USD 1,640 per month; around 60% came from women's work in microenterprises (Mello, 2014). This additional income provided greater financial stability and autonomy, allowing women to make more informed decisions about household spending and investments. For instance, 16% of women interviewed invested in productive assets such as açaí fruit processing equipment and beekeeping supplies, further boosting their household incomes (Mello, 2014).

Moreover, the collective nature of these microenterprises allowed women to combine resources and set up local marketplaces, promoting economic growth within their communities. These investments not only benefited individual families but also created sustainable income streams for multiple households, enhancing overall economic resilience. By managing their income and assets, women lessened their financial vulnerability and were able to support their children's education and obtain health care. Moreover, through support networks within the communities, these benefits were also shared with other women in need.

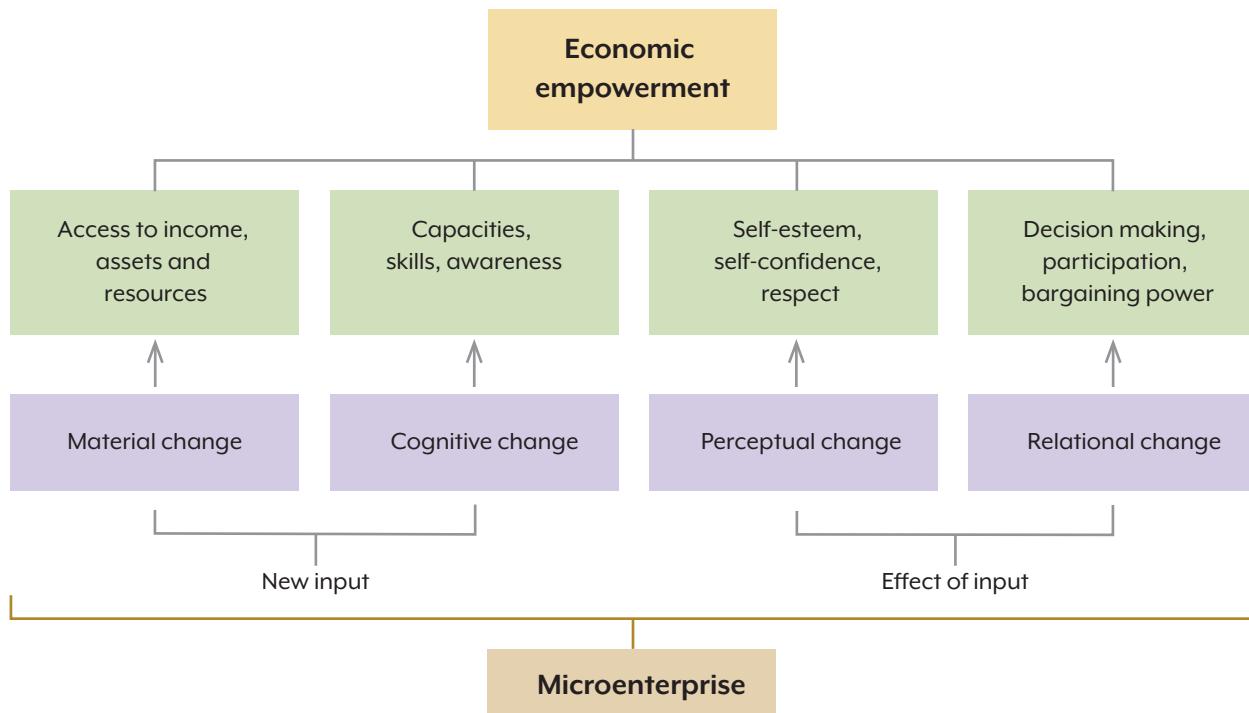


Figure 2. Theoretical framework of effects of microenterprise on women's economic empowerment

Source: Mello, 2014. Based on Kaur et al. (2007) and Chen (1997).

Cognitive dimension

This focuses on the enhancement of women's knowledge and skills through their participation in microenterprises. Training programmes, provided by women's organizations, governmental institutions and the private sector, equipped women with technical skills in areas such as agroforestry, beekeeping and handicrafts. Training usually involved three to four modules, each lasting three to four days. These educational opportunities improved women's ability to manage and expand their businesses and increased their awareness of market dynamics and sustainable practices.

Approximately 72% of these training programmes were conducted within the community, allowing family members, including husbands and children, to participate alongside the women. This communal learning environment facilitated the sharing of knowledge and skills, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration. As a result of ongoing training, women developed greater self-efficacy and resource management capabilities, enabling them to navigate economic opportunities more effectively and advocate

for their needs, within both their businesses and their communities (Mello, 2014). The ongoing training and education are essential for the economic empowerment of women; this is evidenced by the noticeable changes in their lives and society, as described by a participant in women's Group D, Nova Timboteua, Pará: *"I never dreamed of working with bees in my life. Because I got training, today I know how to work with bees, what kind of plants you have to have to get honey, because you know you want to reforest, not burn the forest, if you want to earn money."*

Perceptual dimension

Perceptual empowerment pertains to changes in women's self-esteem, self-confidence and perceived value within their households and communities. The participation of women in the enterprises has led to greater recognition of and respect for them by both the community and their families. This heightened sense of worth was largely attributed to their financial independence and active roles in economic activities, which repositioned them as vital contributors to household and community welfare (Mello, 2014).



Products from rural women's microenterprises from the sustainable use of the forest, Belém, Pará, Brazil. Photo: Denyse Mello

Women's increased self-confidence often led them to take on leadership roles and mentor others, creating a ripple effect of empowerment within their communities. This empowerment was evident in how women perceived their economic participation as bolstering relational equity and mutual respect. Several testimonials, such as the following one from a participant in the Alto Pindorama Association, in Group B, Capanema, Pará, highlight this impact:

"He has changed a lot; before, he never heard me. Sometimes he created conflict for me to participate in any meeting or group. Because of this I like the model of participating in a group, and I can produce at home and we involve the whole family in meetings and training."

Participant, Group B

Relational dimension

This encompasses changes in women's bargaining power, decision-making roles and social dynamics within households and communities (Deere et al., 2012). The study found that 64% of women reported improved joint decision-making on financial matters within their households. This collaborative approach promoted household equity and reduced women's vulnerability to economic and domestic exploitation (Mello, 2014).

Women's active involvement in microenterprises also enhanced their representation in community organizations and decision-making bodies. By forming alliances and women-led cooperatives, participants advocated more effectively for fair market prices, access to government support, and equitable resource distribution. These collective actions amplified women's

voices in institutional negotiations, ensuring that their interests were adequately represented and addressed.

In addition, the robust partnership between these micro-enterprises and women's organizations, Catholic Church groups, rural and urban women's associations, as well as the feminist movement, provided participants with access to training, knowledge-sharing opportunities, and participation in events hosted by these entities. This collaboration has greatly enhanced women's capacity to advocate for pressing social issues, such as education and health care, while also elevating their visibility and influence within local governance structures. Furthermore, it has strengthened their ability to advocate for collective interests, including infrastructure development and the expansion of market access. A participant in the Santa Maria Association, Women's group, Santa Maria, Pará, highlights this impact:

“Before joining the microenterprise, I had no say in household matters. Now, my husband and I discuss everything together, from expenses to investments.”

Participant, Santa Maria

The role of women's microenterprises

Reducing environmental pressure and enhancing forest conservation

Women's collective microenterprises in the Amazon contribute to environmental conservation and economic empowerment. These enterprises enhance women's knowledge and skills in natural resource management through training in sustainable practices. Examples include implementing agroforestry systems that increase food security and biodiversity, reducing or eliminating agricultural burning, reforesting degraded areas, and conducting environmental campaigns to protect springs and rivers. The results of the study demonstrated that the area worked by rural women in their microenterprise activities represented 21% to 70% of total household land area, varying widely depending on local conditions, which affected the size of property areas (Mello, 2014).

Rural women's collective microenterprises engaged in several forest and natural resource management activities. Specifically, 34% worked with forest

management, 29% were involved in agroforestry, 20% combined medicinal plant management and agroforestry, and 17% engaged in a combination of livestock management and agroforestry activities (Mello, 2014). These activities varied by location: in extractive reserve areas, women primarily worked with forest products such as seed collection, resin extraction and clay and fallen timber collection for handicraft production. In official agricultural settlement areas, women focused on implementing agroforestry practices that combined apiculture, fruit tree cultivation, collection of medicinal plants, and mini agro-industries to add value to agroforestry products.

Additionally, 63% of women reported that agroforestry systems boosted their families' food security by enhancing the supply of animal protein and vegetables and fruits (Mello, 2014). These practices illustrate the positive impact of women's collective microenterprises on sustainable resource management in the Amazon region. The study found that 42% of the households of the women interviewed changed their land-use management to avoid deforestation and fire use, and also adopted other practices — investment in land management, soil fertility, reforestation, etc. — potentially reducing some of the more important sources of degradation and carbon emissions in the Brazilian Amazon region (Mello, 2014).

Conclusion and recommendations

Women's stewardship of natural resources in the Amazon links economic empowerment to conservation, benefiting both livelihoods and ecosystems. Activities such as agroforestry and eco-friendly crafts support biodiversity while generating income. Collective microenterprises enhance leadership skills, influence policy-making, and address issues such as land rights and resource access. Challenges include limited access to credit, market information, and formalization processes, highlighting the importance of cooperatives and of partnerships with NGOs and financial institutions.

Policymakers and practitioners play key roles in supporting women-led enterprises through capacity-building, inclusive land policies, mentorship programmes and research into long-term gender equity impacts. Holistic support from governments, NGOs and the private sector can amplify the transformative impact of these initiatives, driving sustainable community development and gender equality.

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