

**EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP:  
A CASE STUDY IN EAST JAVA, INDONESIA**

**AUGENDRA BHUKUTH**

ITSMI Management School, Paris, France

augendra@gmail.com

**BERNARD TERRANY**

IPAG Business School, Paris, France

b.terrany@ipag.fr

**ANI WULANDARI**

Narotama University, Surabaya, Indonesia

ani.wulandari@narotama.ac.id

***Abstract:** The article analyzes the practices of two NGOs aiming to empower women through entrepreneurship in the province of East Java with the capital city Surabaya, Indonesia. Both NGOs have similar goals: to improve the well-being of women as well as to empower them in their households, communities and businesses; however, they differ in methodologies. Thus, it is thought-provoking to compare the ways and means applied by both NGOs to empower women. Their methodologies are presented and analyzed in order to capture their strengths and weaknesses, following a qualitative study that was carried out in two villages in the surrounding areas of Surabaya, Indonesia.*

***Keywords:** Indonesia, microenterprises, NGOs, women empowerment.*

## **1. Introduction**

One of the seventeen sustainable development goals (SDGs) is gender equality and women empowerment (UNDP, available online). A step towards women's and girls' empowerment is fighting against their poverty (Chant 2016), which means that the empowerment of poor and vulnerable women is also a key factor for economic and social

development in developing countries (Duflo 2012; Kabeer 2005; Tambunan 2009). Women entrepreneurship is essential to achieving this specific goal of sustainable development (Shah and Saurabh 2015; Sharma and Varma 2008). NGOs are playing an important role in this process by providing several services through specific projects to reach the SDGs (see Hashemi et al. 1996; Mink et al. 2018). One of the projects to empower women in Indonesia is the Papua Women's Empowerment project, developed by Oxfam in Papua, Indonesia (Caeyers and Lombardini 2015[2013/14]). Other examples are the projects discussed here.

This article compares and analyzes two different methodologies implemented by two NGOs to support poor and vulnerable women involved in microenterprises. Hence, the aim is to analyze the efficiency of the methodologies developed by the NGOs to achieve their goals. Furthermore, Sen's "capability approach" (Sen 1999, 2005, 2008), which is based on the principle of freedom, is used to analyze the role of women empowerment projects implemented by NGOs in Surabaya, Indonesia, in developing the women entrepreneurs' capabilities.

The empowerment of individuals is based on their capacity to do and to be. However, defining empowerment accurately has never been an easy task, as it requires a multidisciplinary approach (Corrêa Cavalieri and Neves Almeida 2018). Thus, it is not our intent to give a precise definition of empowerment. For the purposes of this study, empowerment is considered to be a process which leads to higher stages of evolution in human development, such as increased self-esteem, better relationships with other individuals, better living conditions (Lord and Hutchison 1993), which in the capability approach is qualified as higher functioning (Gries and Naudé 2011). According to Sen (2008:271), "Functionings represent parts of the state of a person – in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. 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". Hence, Gandjour (2008) explains that capabilities and functionings are interrelated. For example, what one can achieve depends on one's state to be and to do. Hence, we assume that if "to be" involves the capability "to do", different methodologies will have to be adopted when it is considered that "to do" implies the capability "to be".

The economic development of an individual does not only depend on internal characteristics (skilful, gentle, resourceful, confident etc), but also on the social environment which creates opportunities to do business and builds networks through social capital. For that reason, an important factor in an individual's empowerment is the social actor's ability to take decisions and to achieve their goals. Empowerment hence consists in giving more political power to powerless individuals (Moscovitch and Drover 1981; see also Esquivel 2016) or in

conveying opportunities to those being denied access to resources. However, the freedom of being and doing is restricted for most people in developing countries, as they do not have access to markets and to resources. Hence, one of the obstacles in the way of entrepreneurs, especially women entrepreneurs, is access to the market and the difficulty to cope with competition in a highly competitive business environment (OECD 2004). In such cases, empowerment means increasing women's capabilities to compete in a highly competitive market.

In this article, we analyze the effectiveness of two programmes implemented by NGOs to empower women in Indonesia. Our aim is to examine the methods applied by the NGOs, called 'NGO A' and 'NGO B', to empower women in East Java, Indonesia. Indonesia is a Muslim country where women enjoy great freedom. The NGOs studied work with poor households, given the situation that the poverty of these households is multidimensional, both monetary and capabilities deprivation. The procedures used by the NGOs are key determinants to the success of the projects; therefore, it is thought-provoking to compare the ways and means applied by both NGOs and their efficiency in terms of empowering women.

The paper is systematized as follows:

In the second section, the research methodology is presented. The third section describes the objectives of both NGOs studied. The fourth section describes the approaches used by the NGOs. The fifth section investigates the NGOs' methodologies and, in the last section, the main conclusions and a discussion of the findings and future research perspectives are presented.

## **2. Research Methodology**

NGOs intervene in different aspects of society and human life. They play an important role in providing deprived people with access to markets and resources (Allah Nikkhah and Bin Redzuan 2010). These organizations, being involved in social issues, have a better understanding of the challenges faced by women in scarce socioeconomic environments and know how to address them in an efficient way. Success stories of NGOs at micro- and meso-levels are numerous all over the world (Kumari 2013; Uilleberg 2009). NGOs empower people by improving their capabilities through education, health, justice and infrastructures, particularly in developing countries (Deeppa et al. 2011; Kavitha 2017).

A qualitative approach was adopted to study the methods employed by the NGOs to address the issue of poverty among the villagers through entrepreneurship programmes. The qualitative approach has one main advantage: it allows a better understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon studied. As poverty is multidimensional, it is structural, in the sense that

poverty is rooted in the structure of the society (Brady 2006). Discussing with people involved in poverty alleviation programmes gives new insights into the strategies and approaches used by the organizations. Different methodologies were used to get information from the households involved with the programmes: observation of their practices, focus group interviews and individual interviews. These methods indicate a new direction of research and enhance the comprehension of practices in the field and the challenges encountered to tackle the issue of poverty. Structured interviews were organized with the beneficiaries of projects (twelve beneficiaries), as well as with the NGOs officials who took part in the projects (chairwomen of NGO A and B) and one local government official in charge of the project.

The NGOs studied are among the most active in these villages and have a lot of members. They were recommended for the study by the local government. The aim is to determine whether the projects are efficient in empowering their beneficiaries, who are mainly women. These organizations' methodologies for empowering women through entrepreneurship are part of the study and their analysis is presented in the following sections.

### **3. Understanding Women Empowerment and the Role of NGOs**

As noted in the Introduction, empowerment is an important part of human development in Sen's and Nussbaum's capability approach (Keleher 2014). Robeyns (2006) states that the capability approach can be applied for several purposes, one of them being the development of policies for governments and NGOs. The capability approach argues that the well-being of an individual is determined by their freedom to choose their own way of being and living, and to conceive their own life. Individuals also have other objectives they want to achieve rather than well-being (Burchardt 2009). In the capability approach, the notion of functioning plays a determinant role in the individuals' empowerment. All individuals possess a set of functionings, which can be internal, for example knowledge, a *savoir-faire*, and external, for example social capital, which they might employ to transform resources to achieve higher functionings (Alkire 2005; Robeyns 2005, 2006). In Sen's approach, capability is the ability or the opportunity to choose specific functionings (Claassen 2014). Therefore, capability becomes the potential functioning of an individual (Hill 2003). At every new state of life there is a new functioning which represents the individual's capability.

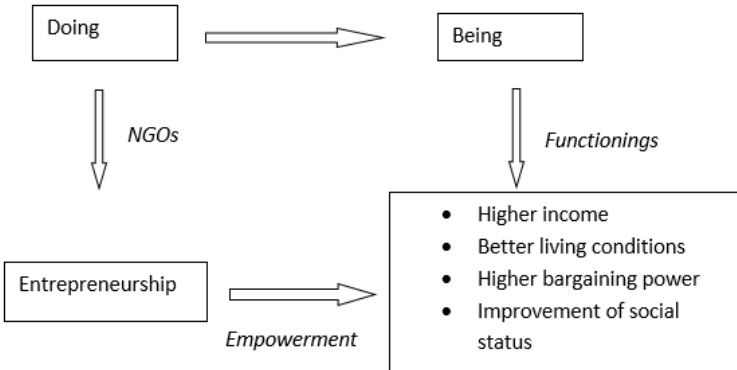
The capability approach is used in the fight against poverty, to improve children's well-being (Biggeri et al. 2011) and to develop sustainable development goals (Ballet et al. 2017; Martins 2013; Pelenc et al. 2013). Therefore, NGOs empower individuals to build internal functioning (knowledge, training, self-respect) and external functioning such as

improvement in social status (Rudolf et al. 2011; Ulleberg 2009). Collective capabilities are also important components in the fight against poverty and in empowering women (Ballet et al. 2007; Cleaver 2007; Ibrahim 2006). There are different forms of action taken by NGOs to empower their beneficiaries in developing and developed countries, specific to their local contexts. Moreover, Bhukuth et al. (2018) argue that being part of a productive organization increases the income of its members; thus, NGOs and cooperatives empower its members economically.

Since the 1990s, NGOs have been growing fast in the Indonesian economy (Fakih 1991). Caeyers and Lombardini (2015[2013/14]:22), in Papua, Oxfam, have developed a set of indicators for evaluating women’s empowerment. There are seven indicators thereof: a) “women’s awareness of and participation” (in the study it was in PNP Mandiri/RESPEK); b) “women’s vocational and entrepreneurial skills”; c) “women’s ability to make decisions and influence (household, women’s group, community group)”; d) “women’s self-perception (self-efficacy, attitude to women’s roles and rights)”; e) “women’s personal freedom (freedom of movement, attitude to domestic violence)”; f) “women’s access to and control over resources (independent income, ownership over strategic assets, access to credit)”; g) “women’s support from social networks (social connectivity, group membership)”. The case study reflects on some of these indicators in the case of women’s empowerment in East Java, Indonesia.

The objectives of NGO A and NGO B are to empower women through entrepreneurship. The two organizations deal with poor and vulnerable women, therefore the objectives of the NGOs are to alleviate poverty and reduce vulnerability. The two NGOs have based their concept of empowerment on the hypothesis that “doing” will determine the “being” of women. Hence, the “doing” of women should be improved through the entrepreneurship program.

**Figure 1. NGOs’ Approaches and Goals (Source: Authors)**



The aim of the entrepreneurship projects is to increase women's income, which will improve their position within the household and in the community. The projects are based on the assumption that housewives are a cost for their families. Therefore, through the entrepreneurship projects, housewives will no longer be a burden in the family economy; instead, they can earn an income and become financially autonomous.

Studies conducted in different developing countries demonstrate positive impacts of women's involvement in income generating economic activities, within the household and the community (Kabeer 2005). Their financial vulnerability will decrease in the household and they will not be dependent on their husbands for their living; in short, they will transform themselves into an asset to the family. As has been stated in the Asian Development Bank report (2010), men value the extra money earned by women. Tambunan (2017) argues that women are motivated to run a business as they will be able to contribute to the households' income and be financially independent. By earning their own income, they could contribute to the household expenses and therefore they will gain in bargaining power, which leads to a better position in the household in relation to their husbands and in-laws. They could be more confident to intervene in decisions concerning the family as well as the children's future, mainly in decisions regarding the children's education. The income earned from their business will also be invested in the house to improve the family's living conditions. They could purchase durable goods like television, freezer, computer, furniture, etc. They could also participate in community development. Furthermore, Beard (2007) has explained that low income households participate less in community development. This is particularly true for women-headed households and households where women play a less important economic role. Participation in community development bonds people, which is crucial in creating a sustainable social environment (Corrêa Cavalieri and Neves Almeida 2018). Women's participation in economic and social activities would have an important impact on the community.

The purposes of both NGOs are quite similar; however, the methodologies adopted to empower women, the "doing" processes are different. We analyze these differences which impact on women's empowerment.

#### **4. Methodologies Adopted by NGOs**

The methodologies employed by NGOs are essential for the success of the projects implemented. Before implementing a project, the methodology must be well defined because the success of the project depends upon the method itself. The policy is commonly based on the

objectives of the project, as presented in Figure 1 in our study, and on the ground level reality. Indeed, the methodology might be altered according to the characteristics of the beneficiaries. The two NGOs analyzed here undertake different paths. Let us consider first the approach employed by NGO A.

a. The Methodology of NGO A

NGO A works with the local government and the project is financed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The entrepreneurship project is part of an inclusive programme implemented by the UNDP to alleviate poverty in the village. The village itself is subject to different projects, one of them being the fight against child malnutrition. A private company is also involved in this scheme and finances the project through its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme. The village is a coastal village and is considered one of the poorest villages in Surabaya. The local government receives funds from the UNDP and the private company to finance the project, while the NGO is a beneficiary of this project. NGO A is a cooperative, in the sense that the members of the organization are the beneficiaries of the project. The beneficiaries do not receive funds from the NGO or from the local government or from the UNDP and the private company. They are entrepreneurs who are already involved in a productive activity and are mainly family microenterprises.

The members of the cooperative participated in defining their shortages. They concluded that they had the skill to produce the goods; nevertheless, they lacked marketing techniques to promote their product. The market is limited to the village; thus, to extend the market, they require marketing skills. The NGO equipped these family enterprises with training in marketing that covered selling techniques and packaging. These skills should be able to assist them in increasing their market share and becoming professionals. They learnt how to keep records of their expenses and benefits. The professionalization process of the family businesses is supposed to increase their profitability.

The fact in the field for NGO A: information from the local government and the NGO regarding the marketing project, as well as the packaging techniques, is scarce. We assume that the training given will be adding up a significant benefit for these microenterprises on their pathway to become professionally managed.

b. The Methodology of NGO B

More information was received from NGO B. NGO B was founded by a woman who was jailed because she was fighting for the rights of workers and against corruption in the

company where she was working. She is a very well-known activist in Indonesia for her fight against corruption and for women's rights, and also for being vocal towards powerful people. She started the NGO to empower women in her village. Initially, she started a business and employed women. As she was getting more and more orders from the shops and large companies in Surabaya, she was unable to supply the entire demand. She founded the NGO and asked the women working for her and other women in the village to start a business to supply the market. NGO B has the support of a large company that purchases the product made by the NGO's businesses. The relationship between the NGO, microenterprises and large enterprise is part of a CSR programme.

The NGO was having difficulties convincing women to start a business. Most of their families were not allowing women to work. According to the NGO, the women from the village were not permitted to work either by their husbands or their in-laws. The background reason regarding this prohibition is related to religion, the domestic chores, and other domestic responsibilities towards the husbands and children. Tambunan (2007) also finds that lack of education, culture and religion are constraints faced by women in developing their businesses. On the contrary, Azmi (2017) argues that women participation in entrepreneurial activities is not inconsistent with Islam. Hence, it's poverty that explains the women's low level of participation in economic and community activities. Beard (2005) also argues that the role of women from poorer households in Indonesia is limited to the family. They participate less in community development activities.

The Chairwoman of the NGO spent time trying to convince the husbands and in-laws to allow the women to start their business, offering as main reason the chance to improve the household living conditions. She came to a compromise that, instead of working the whole day, the women may allocate an amount of time to the business, while at the same time still focusing on household chores. Therefore, the women work only for a very limited duration of time, around three to five hours per day.

The NGO provided training to women on the production of goods. Most of the women, except those already working for the activist, had not had any experience in the business activity before.

## **5. Analysis of the Methodologies**

Two different strategies were implemented to address the issue of empowerment. NGO A carried out empowerment through training in marketing and packaging, and gave families the freedom to market their products. The strategy was to increase their capability in



trading the goods on the market. The women already possessed production skills. However, they lacked knowledge in how to increase the size of the market. The size of the market is restricted to the village, thus the production is limited by the demand. The village market is highly competitive in the sense that all the producers trade their product in the same market place. As a result of the project, they have customized their clients. Moreover, all the members of the NGO are involved in the same activity. Hence, to be able to compete in the market, they differentiate their product in order to capture the demand and they have regular demand on a daily basis. Their income is stable over time, although they are not able to increase their profit.

The market is structured as follows: The microenterprises produce shrimp paste, purchasing raw materials from the seafood suppliers. The village is one of the main shrimp and other seafood producers in the province. For this reason, the raw material is available and it is not expensive to buy seafood in the village. The husbands' role is most often to deal with purchasing raw materials. They bargain with the suppliers, mainly with small fishermen, and deal for the best price and they do not change the supplier. Buying from small fishermen represents an advantage, in that they know the fishermen will not sell the product to another buyer.

The production technique before the product is finally ready to sell is long and complicated. The women spend most of the time in the production and selling process. They are the sole beneficiaries of the activity. Furthermore, they trade their product either to local shops or at home. The clients are mainly the villagers who come to their house to purchase the final product. The buyers are usually familiar people already known by the women entrepreneurs.

**Figure 2. NGO A intervention in the market structure of shrimp paste**



The benefit they receive from their activity is not high enough to improve their well-being. Every day, they have to make sufficient profit to buy raw materials. In other words, the income is being invested in the company. Some women have bought new machines in order to increase the production to allow them to supply a bigger market outside the village. The objective of the NGO is to provide the women with training in marketing in order to boost the product's selling points. Once their product appears to be more attractive, and are complete with proper information regarding the ingredients, expiry date and nutrition, the customer will be assured to purchase it.

In the case of NGO B, there is no local government or international organization funding the project. The initiative comes solely from a woman who desires to change the destiny of women in her village. The chairman of the NGO is either hated or appreciated and honored for her social activity. As she was in jail, it was not easy for her to convince all the families to allow women to work. She is a person of great charisma and communication skills; moreover, she is not afraid of arguing with men. She was able to build trustworthy relationships with families and the villagers because of her success in business and social life. The women working with her were able to become entrepreneurs and their living situations have also improved. That makes other women seek to join the team and start their own business. These women were given training on how to produce the goods and meet the standard requirements for a good quality product. Therefore, the training programme consists in helping women understand the production process and develop the quality of the product.

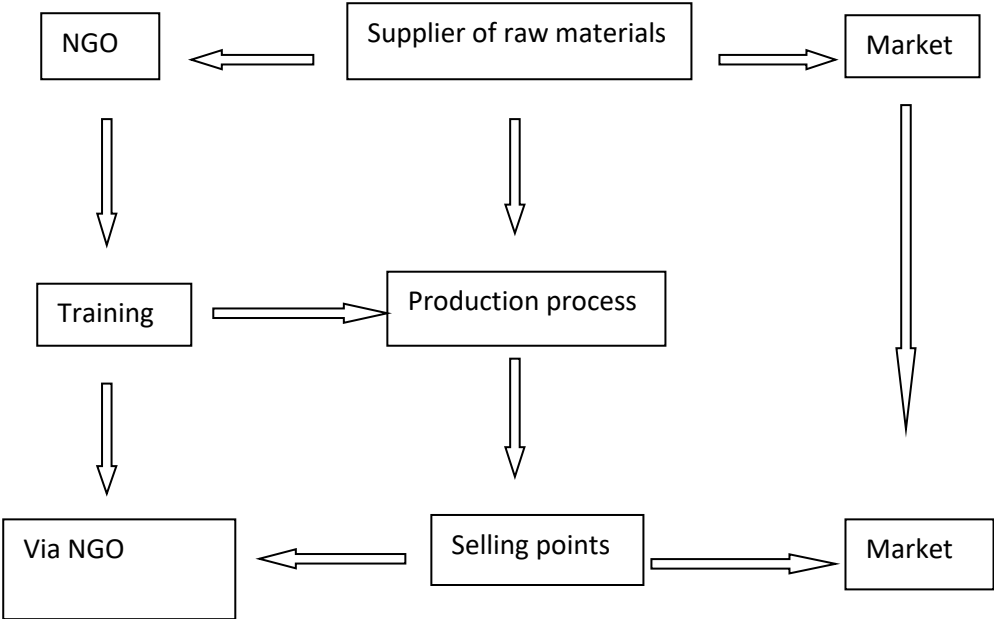
The microenterprises involved with NGO B are able to either sell the product directly on the market or to sell the product through the NGO to the shops and the large company supporting the NGO with its CSR programme. Most of the time, the microenterprises trade their product through the NGO, as the women do not have networks to supply the product on the market. They are certain to sell their product with the NGO. These women are alone; without the support of their husbands, they do not have adequate time to market their product, as their time is allocated to production and household chores. The market is already available through the NGO.

The market is structured as follows: they have to obtain the raw materials to produce the goods for the market or to purchase them through the NGO. Generally, they purchase raw materials from the NGO.

This organization is involved in every step of the microenterprises. It provides raw materials to and advises women if they do not want to purchase from the NGO. They are offered

training regarding the techniques of production in order to improve the quality of the product as well as to sell the product. The NGO purchases according to the demand on the market, and has to market the product to large companies, retail shops and shopping malls. If the women entrepreneurs do not want to buy raw materials from the NGO, they can purchase directly on the market.

**Figure 3. NGOs intervention in the market structure**



**6. Discussion and Conclusion**

In this article, two cases have been presented, both having the same aim, namely empowering women through entrepreneurship. The methodologies adopted by the NGOs involved in empowering women are different. In the case of NGO A, the microenterprises lack openness to city markets, and, as a result, the entrepreneurs have to find their market themselves. They have been trained to market their product to new markets. However, the village is rather far from the main market, the city of Surabaya. To market their product in new markets they require more time investment in convincing retailers to sell their product and in network building. Social ties are the main factor in getting access to new markets (Bhukuth et al. 2020). The social capital of entrepreneurs is defined as social network and trust gives access to markets. When entrepreneurs do not have direct connections with retailer shops and supermarkets, they have to be recommended by somebody known to both parties. As has been argued by Burt (2001), there are structural holes in social networking and this is especially the

case of poor households. They lack social capital, which is detrimental to microenterprises (Bhukuth et al. 2018). These entrepreneurs do not have access to city markets despite the training received. In this particular case, the training received becomes impractical because of the low level or absence of social capital. Moreover, women also lack experience in marketing. Although they have been involved in marketing their product outside the village, minimum experience in dealing with people affects access to the market (OECD 2004). They also do not have confidence in themselves as most of them are illiterate. Therefore, a low level of human capital (the education level of individuals) affects their capacity to develop their business (Tambunan 2007) and their personal characteristics. In the process of empowerment, acquiring self-esteem and confidence is a main part of the process of achieving higher functionings. The women are not able to achieve new functionings and their well-being remains unchanged, and so does their social status.

In the case of NGO B, the microenterprises do not have difficulties in selling their product on the market, since the NGO uses its network to find new markets. Therefore, the microenterprises have to focus simply on production and on refining the quality of the product. Moreover, the microenterprises can also sell their product on the market without using the NGO's network. The aim of the NGO *in fine* is to let the microenterprises become autonomous and penetrate the market independently. Nevertheless, the main objective is to improve the living standards of women through entrepreneurship. In this case, it seems that NGO B has done quite well in improving the well-being of women. Moreover, as women are successful in business, which provides a substantial income to the household, the husbands are getting more and more involved in marketing the products outside the NGO's network.

From the cases examined, several conclusions can be drawn: the first one is that a participatory approach does not always provide efficient outcomes. In the case of NGO A, the women indeed participated in defining their problems. They all pointed to the fact that they needed to develop their market, therefore they agreed with the NGO's plan to improve their skills in marketing. In this particular case, however, the issue is not marketing but rather the location of the village, which is far away from the main market, the city of Surabaya. When marketing is one of the weaknesses, transportation is also another shortcoming in the growth of the enterprises, and so is the social network.

The other finding is that women alone cannot develop their business. They need assistance from the family members: husbands and children. In one of the cases studied from NGO A, an entrepreneur is working with her son, who has graduated from a public university in Surabaya. The son uses his network in the city to find markets and he supplies the product in

retail shops. He also covers the transport to deliver the product to the shops every day. The son wishes to take over the business; however, the mother desires the opposite. She wants to control the business as long as it is profitable. The son is not being paid a wage for the job he does, but only for managing the family business. He is involved in creating more networks to sell the product to more shops in Surabaya.

The development of the businesses also hinges on the motives behind their creation. One of the motives of being an entrepreneur is financial independence and the chance of becoming autonomous. This finding is consistent with those of Tambunan (2017). However, one of the interesting outcomes of the study is based on the argument that micro-entrepreneurs do not want to increase their income above a threshold level. They limit their income and empowerment level within a minimum and a maximum level. This argument is based on the assumption that if women have a higher level of empowerment, it could create trouble for the family and in the community. Women know very well where their boundaries lie and they want to respect them in order to maintain family and social cohesion. More research has to be done in assessing the impact of the entrepreneurship project on the women's well-being. It is part of the research that will be carried out with the women involved.

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