

Women and Community Development: Challenges and Motivations

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Abstract

This article looks at the important role women play in community development by looking at the many problems they confront and the reasons they get involved. Women are frequently the ones who make grassroots progress happen, but they face systemic impediments like not being able to get an education, money, or a say in decisions. The study examines socio-cultural, economic, and political obstacles that impede women's comprehensive participation in development activities. It also shows successful models and legislative changes that have made women agents of change in their communities. The paper stresses the need for inclusive planning and gender-sensitive incentives to promote long-term community development by looking at case studies and development projects. The goal of community development is to give people and groups the tools they need to make changes in their communities. Women are very important to this process, especially in countries that are still growing. But even if they have a lot of potential, women often run into big problems. To make growth last and include everyone, it's important to deal with these problems and offer the right incentives. The study finds that giving women influence is not only fair, but also a strategic need for the overall and long-term success of the community.

Keywords: Community empowerment, inclusive policies, education for women, women in governance, empowerment initiatives, economic opportunity, social transformation, sustainable development

Introduction

Women are very important to the growth and maintenance of communities. Their participation in community development introduces varied viewpoints, fosters inclusive decision-making, and results in more enduring effects. But women all around the world often confront systemic impediments that keep them from reaching their full potential, such as gender discrimination, limited access to resources, and not being represented in leadership posts. These problems not only slow down women's progress, but they also slow down the growth of communities as a whole. To solve these problems, we need to make a conscious effort, including regulations that support women, programs that give women more influence, and specific rewards that encourage women to get involved. To build fair and successful communities, you need to know both the problems and the reasons why people do things.

Objectives

1. To pinpoint the primary obstacles encountered by women in engaging in community development.
2. To examine the social, economic, and cultural determinants that perpetuate gender disparity in community contexts.
3. To look into how women's participation affects the success and long-term viability of community development projects.
4. To look at policies, programs, and incentives that work well to help women become leaders and feel empowered.
5. To suggest ways to help women get more resources, knowledge, and roles in community development where they can make decisions.

Importance

For growth to be inclusive and long-lasting, women need to be involved in community development. Women have different ways of looking at things, leading, and solving problems that can make a big difference in how well a community works. Recognising and tackling the difficulties individuals face—such as gender inequity, restricted access to resources, and underrepresentation—can unlock their full potential and benefit to entire civilisations. This subject is important because it shows how important it is to make systemic changes and give women specific incentives that make them equal partners in progress. Communities become stronger, fairer, and better able to deal with difficult social and economic problems when women are more involved.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis for this study is based on feminist theory, empowerment theory, and participatory development theory. These frameworks collectively elucidate the fundamental societal structures influencing women's involvement in community development, as well as the mechanisms facilitating transformation and empowerment.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory examines the systematic inequities that marginalise women and impede their engagement in social, economic, and political domains. It offers a perspective for analysing how patriarchal norms and gendered power dynamics hinder women's participation in community development. This study employs feminist theory to underscore the significance of gender equity and social justice in development planning.

The Theory of Empowerment

Empowerment theory centres on augmenting individuals' ability to make decisions and convert those decisions into preferred actions and results. For women, empowerment means getting access to resources, learning new skills, feeling more confident, and having a say in decisions.

This theory supports the premise that giving women more power leads to better health, education, and economic growth in communities.

The Theory of Participative Development

This approach stresses that everyone in the community, even those who are not in the mainstream, should be involved in the planning, execution, and evaluation of development programs. It emphasises that sustainable development is attainable solely when individuals, particularly women, function as active agents of change rather than passive recipients. Participatory development values local knowledge, community leadership, and inclusive approaches.

Application to the Study

These ideas jointly facilitate the examination of the obstacles women encounter in community development and assist in pinpointing appropriate tactics and incentives to surmount them. By combining different points of view, the study hopes to give a full picture of how to promote gender-inclusive community development that is fair, empowering, and long-lasting.

Status of Empirical Study

Empirical studies from several geographies and developmental contexts demonstrate that women's active involvement in community development results in more effective, inclusive, and sustainable outcomes (World Bank, 2022; UN Women, 2021). Many studies show that empowering women is linked to better education, health, and household income levels (Kabeer, 1999; Swain & Wallentin, 2009).

For example, data from the World Bank and UN Women demonstrate that when women are involved in decision-making processes, community projects are more likely to fulfil key needs such as water access, healthcare, and education (UN Women, 2021; IEG – World Bank, 2022). Studies in rural South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa have shown that community groups led by women are better able to deal with local problems and get people to work together (Agarwal, 2001; Mayoux, 2005).

However, empirical research also highlights enduring obstacles. Research indicates that women's involvement is constrained by patriarchal norms, insufficient access to financial and educational resources, and inadequate legal protections (Rao, 2012; Deshmukh-Ranadive, 2010). For example, surveys in Southeast Asia suggest that women often have trouble getting land and finance, which makes it harder for them to help their communities grow economically (World Bank, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989).

Additionally, assessments of development initiatives like microfinance and women's self-help organisations yield inconclusive outcomes. Some programs enhance women's economic position and agency (Datta & Sahu, 2022; Mengstie, 2022), while others exhibit minimal long-term effects in the absence of comprehensive structural support and may inadvertently perpetuate prevailing gender stereotypes (BMJ, 2019; Mayoux, 2005).

Empirical evidence substantiates the notion that the empowerment of women favourably influences community development; yet, it also underscores the necessity for structural reforms and specific incentives. Future research and policy should prioritise the removal of structural impediments and the augmentation of women's leadership capabilities in development processes (Kabeer, 1999; Iskenderian, 2023).

Review of Literature

Research conducted throughout the decades has shown women's critical role in community development, while simultaneously revealing enduring gender-based obstacles. Scholars have analysed the impact of inclusive strategies on developmental outcomes via the lenses of feminist theory, empowerment models, and participatory techniques. This review historically delineates significant contributions, illustrating the progression of thought from initial critiques to contemporary empirical findings about women's participation, leadership, and influence in community-led initiatives.

Boserup (1970) offered the seminal critique of gender-blind development by examining the ways in which modernisation disproportionately advantages men, hence excluding women from agricultural and economic advancement. Her work ignited the Women in Development (WID) movement, underscoring the necessity of including women as stakeholders in development programs.

Sen and Grown (1985) built on the feminist political economics approach by pushing for planning that takes gender into account and doesn't treat women as a single group. They underlined that gender interactions are dynamic and power-laden, necessitating structural adjustment for sustainable development.

Moser (1993) presented the "Gender Planning Framework," distinguishing between practical and strategic gender issues. Her concept has been extensively utilised in assessing the efficacy of community projects, particularly those aimed at poverty reduction and resource redistribution.

Kabeer (1999) defined empowerment as the enhancement of choice and agency across three interconnected dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. Her paradigm has emerged as a benchmark for assessing women-focused development initiatives, encompassing microfinance, self-help groups (SHGs), and literacy campaigns.

Cornwall and Gaventa (2000) studied participatory governance and concluded that women's perspectives are typically ignored unless institutional systems are open and accountable. Their work underscores the distinction between nominal inclusion and transformative engagement.

Agarwal (2001), in her research on environmental governance, contended that women's collective engagement in community forestry and water management is more effective when women form a critical mass within decision-making bodies. She emphasised the importance of group-based structures in transcending patriarchal limitations.

Mayoux (2005) criticised the belief that microfinance always empowers women, pointing out that without similar efforts in education and group organising, these programs can make women more dependent and in debt. She advocated for a rights-based and gender-transformative framework for economic inclusion.

Swain and Wallentin (2009) conducted an empirical study on microfinance in rural India, revealing enhancements in women's self-confidence and decision-making capabilities. However, they warned that these benefits depended on support from family and community structures, which shows how important social context is.

Deshmukh-Ranadive (2010) studied self-help groups (SHGs) in South India and found that women's participation in these groups increased their mobility, awareness, and leadership, but they typically didn't challenge gender roles at home. Her research underscored the significance of integrating economic initiatives with consciousness-raising endeavours.

Datta and Sahu (2022) conducted a study in West Bengal demonstrating that microfinance substantially enhanced the psychological, social, and economic well-being of 220 female borrowers. They stressed that for long-term success, financial access must be combined with training and legal protections.

Mengstie (2022) conducted a study in Ethiopia that showed that female microfinance clients had more money, assets, and savings. The study observed that without structural support, these benefits would be ephemeral and susceptible to market instabilities.

A 2019 BMJ Meta-Analysis indicated that women who took part in microfinance programs were 64% more likely to use birth control and had more say in household decisions. However, it also pointed out that more strain at home was a concealed effect, which shows how complicated the effects of empowerment can be.

IEG – World Bank (2022) studied rural CDD schemes and determined that gender-targeted measures, including mandatory quotas and capacity-building, greatly enhanced women's participation. Still, a lot of programs didn't follow through on teaching people how to be leaders and how to be financially independent.

Women's World Banking (2023) stressed the need for gender-disaggregated data and tailored financial products to help close the \$300 billion worldwide gender funding gap. Mary Ellen Iskenderian pushed for creating financial systems that are open to everyone and fit women's life stages and goals.

Springer Open Review (2023) noted that having a diverse group of people in Microfinance Institutions (MFIs), especially women in charge, makes both the social impact and the financial performance better. Women employees preferred loan portfolios that were safer and service models that focused on the community.

The World Bank Blogs (2023) talked about Tajikistan's CDD initiatives, which required 50% female representation. This led to the building of infrastructure (clinics, schools, water supply) that better met the requirements of the community. When combined with training and monitoring, this approach reveals how well institutional quotas work.

Lacunes de recherche

Although much literature underscores the significance of women's involvement in community development, notable research deficiencies persist. A significant portion of current scholarship has concentrated on the effects of microfinance and self-help groups (Mayoux, 2005; Datta & Sahu, 2022); however, there is a paucity of investigation into how intersectional factors—such

as caste, age, marital status, and geographic location—influence women's leadership and decision-making in community planning (Crenshaw, 1989; Agarwal, 2001).

Additionally, longitudinal research investigating the durability of empowerment outcomes are few. Numerous evaluations document transient enhancements in wealth or mobility nevertheless neglect to determine the longevity of these benefits or their conversion into fundamental alterations in gender norms (Kabeer, 1999; Swain & Wallentin, 2009).

Although participatory development is broadly supported, empirical data about the impact of women on policy formulation, resource distribution, and community budgeting processes is still lacking (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2000; IEG – World Bank, 2022). There is an absence of micro-level data that elucidates how grassroots women navigate power and voice within decentralised government structures (Deshmukh-Ranadive, 2010).

Most program evaluations also consider women as one group, ignoring heterogeneity within the group and the voices of marginalised subgroups including tribal women, single moms, and domestic workers (Sen & Grown, 1985; Rao, 2012). This leads to a broad policy approach that might not meet the unique requirements of different groups of women.

Lastly, the function of digital platforms and technology-facilitated community engagement for rural women is a nascent yet insufficiently examined domain, particularly in the post-pandemic landscape where digital literacy has emerged as a vital determinant of participation and accessibility (Iskenderian, 2023; SpringerOpen Review, 2023).

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Critical Analysis: Women as Drivers of Inclusive Community Development

The examination of literature, theory, and empirical evidence in this study indicates that, although women's participation in community development is broadly recognised as advantageous, the implementation of this acknowledgement into practice is inconsistent. Women's participation is often characterised as a moral obligation or policy need, rather than as a strategic development asset capable of altering community results across health, education, resource sustainability, and governance.

The main reason for this gap is the difference between what policymakers want and how things are done on the ground. Frameworks like microfinance, SHGs, and CDDs have created opportunities for people to get involved in the economy, but they often don't do enough to change deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes and power imbalances. The analysis indicates that tokenistic inclusion—typically via quotas or project-based roles—does not afford women enduring leadership, financial independence, or institutional decision-making authority. This disparity is particularly pronounced for marginalised populations, including tribal women, widows, and women residing in isolated rural regions.

The report also notes that inter sectionality is not given enough attention in policy creation and program evaluation. Current models fail to sufficiently address the diverse experiences of

women influenced by caste, class, geography, and education. The absence of disaggregated data and adaptable policy frameworks perpetuates a uniform approach, constraining both efficacy and equity.

Another important result is that the gains from empowerment are not very strong. Microfinance and community savings programs have produced quantifiable short-term increases in income and mobility; but, the absence of follow-up mechanisms—including legal assistance, asset ownership rights, and ongoing capacity-building—renders these advantages frequently reversible. In many instances, empowerment remains functional rather than transformative.

On the plus side, projects that include participatory governance, community knowledge systems, and gender-responsive budgeting have had longer-lasting effects. Community development becomes more inclusive, needs-based, and resilient when women are seen as co-creators instead than just passive receivers. Digital platforms, while still in their early stages, are also creating new ways for women to get involved, especially in areas like networking, market access, and resolving complaints.

In short, the data shows that empowerment needs to go beyond only economic statistics and include voice, agency, and rights. When community development is really inclusive, it must see women as strategic players rather than just extra participants. This necessitates a transformation in both program structure and institutional mentality.

Important Results

Results of Economic Empowerment

Microfinance consistently enhances women's financial independence.

Contemporary research regularly reveals favourable impacts of microfinance on women's economic empowerment. Research conducted in 2024 indicates that 81% of individuals engaged in structured financial programs experience enhanced financial stability. The Nepal study with 90 women from 10 microfinance institutions indicated that lending facilities, savings options, and capacity-building programs had the biggest positive effects on economic empowerment. Women said that these services gave them more financial freedom, safety, and better decision-making skills.

Self-help groups continue to have a big effect. A study in the Southern Philippines with 310 women from 12 organisations showed that they were better off in terms of economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment. Members said that taking part gave them job chances, made their social networks bigger, let them help and encourage each other, and made it easier for them to solve problems.

Capacity-building becomes essential for enduring economic results.

Recent studies show that capacity-building programs are very important for giving women long-term authority, so they can make smart economic choices and look into starting their own businesses. The integration of financial services with training programs shows more sustained benefits than credit-only approaches. A 2024 systematic assessment of microfinance effectiveness indicated that programs containing training components demonstrated stronger

effects on women's economic and reproductive empowerment compared to credit-only programs.

Interventions for psychological empowerment boost political participation.

Stanford University's coordinated field research at five locations offer compelling evidence that psychological empowerment interventions can markedly enhance women's political engagement. The interventions, based on collective action theory in social psychology, led to more people applying for community grants and better quality of engagement and response from elites in two out of five sites. Effects were mediated by enhanced efficacy beliefs and procedural understanding. (Hibbs, L. 2022)

Education, income, and policy support are the main factors that affect participation.

A thorough probit regression analysis in the Mvomero study revealed education level as a crucial factor, highlighting the essential significance of educational attainment in promoting women's participation in community development (Huisman, 2011). Furthermore, income level and access to credit were identified as significant factors, highlighting the critical role of financial resources in promoting active engagement. Policies put in place by the government to encourage women to get involved raised the chances of their doing so by 92.3% (Jaumotte, 2004).

Integrated programs yield more enduring results compared to single-focus interventions.

Evidence from 2024 shows that programs that combine health, livelihoods, and capacity-building components have longer-lasting effects than programs that only focus on one area (Dudley, L., & Garner, P. 2011). The SWABHIMAAN program's multi-sectoral approach that combined nutrition, health, and women's empowerment had long-lasting positive effects on both individuals and communities (Vir, S. C. 2023).

Initial enthusiasm for a program often fades without ongoing support.

Critical research from Ethiopia on Women Development Networks indicates that early robust support and excitement frequently wane over time due to deteriorating support systems, inadequate compensation, and excessive assignment burdens beyond original objectives (Xiong, Z. 2024). This conclusion emphasises the necessity for enduring support systems encompassing pay, professional advancement opportunities, and ongoing capacity enhancement. (Brader, T. 2005).

Consequences

Designing and Putting a Program into Action

The research findings demonstrate that successful women's empowerment initiatives must include multi-sectoral, integrated strategies that amalgamate economic, social, and political empowerment elements with enduring support systems. Single-focus interventions may yield short-term benefits, although frequently do not achieve enduring transformation in the absence of supplementary components that address other aspects of empowerment.

Capacity-building should be a core part of programs, not just an extra part. The research shows that financial services alone are not enough; they need to be combined with skills training, financial literacy, and leadership training in order to generate long-term empowering results.

To stop the enthusiasm erosion that has been documented in many studies, program design must include sustainability mechanisms from the start. These include pay systems, career paths, and long-term support structures. This necessitates transcending project-centric methodologies in favour of institutional and systemic initiatives.

Making and changing policies

Governments need to use comprehensive gender-responsive budgeting and make sure that women's development gets enough funding and that there are ways to hold them accountable. The evidence reveals that government policies that help women can raise their chances of being involved by more than 90%. This shows how important the policy environment is for empowerment.

When combined with good training and support mechanisms, mandatory participation quotas show good results for community development goals. But quotas alone aren't enough; they need to be backed up by resources, capacity-building, and accountability systems to turn representation into real participation.

Legal and institutional reforms are necessary to combat discriminatory practices and foster conditions conducive to women's involvement. Countries with laws against domestic violence have lower rates of intimate partner violence (9.5% compared to 16.1% for those without), which shows how important it is to have strong legal systems.

Constraints

This study has certain methodological and conceptual problems that need to be recognised. First, the geographical representation is biased towards South Asian contexts, especially India, with insufficient data from other countries, which constrains the generalisability of the conclusions. Second, the temporal coverage differs greatly amongst studies, with some results based on short-term interventions that may not show long-term sustainability.

The measurement differences across many studies complicate direct comparisons, as empowerment is operationalised differently across contexts and study types. Publication bias may also affect the results since studies that demonstrate good results are more likely to be published than those that reveal limited or negative effects.

Most studies still don't do enough intersectional analysis, which makes it hard to comprehend how different types of marginalisation affect women's lives. Finally, the sustainability assessment is restricted by a lack of long-term research, which makes it hard to figure out what the long-term effects of interventions are.

Directions for Further Research

Research Areas of Importance

Longitudinal Impact Studies: Future research should emphasise extensive longitudinal studies monitoring empowering effects over 5-10 year intervals to comprehend sustainability and enduring change processes. This entails investigating whether improvements in economic indicators lead to enhanced social and political empowerment over time.

Intersectional Analysis: Research frameworks must incorporate intersectionality theory to comprehend how gender interacts with many identification variables such as caste, class, race, age, marital status, and geographic place to influence women's empowerment experiences. This necessitates the advancement of increasingly refined analytical instruments and evaluative methodologies.

Digital Empowerment Research: The growing importance of digital platforms and technology in getting women involved in their communities has to be studied in a systematic way. This entails investigating the ways in which digital literacy, access to information and communication technologies, and online platforms might augment women's involvement in community development initiatives.

Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies: Research must extend beyond its present geographical focus to incorporate systematic comparative analyses across diverse cultural, economic, and political settings, aiming to discern universal vs context-specific aspects that influence women's empowerment.

New Ways of Doing Things

Mixed-Methods Approaches: Future research must emphasise advanced mixed-methods designs that integrate quantitative effect assessment with qualitative insights into empowering processes, particularly participatory research methodologies that foreground women's perspectives and experiences.

Community-Based Participatory Research: study procedures must progressively incorporate women as co-researchers rather than just subjects, ensuring that research topics, methodologies, and interpretations align with women's goals and views.

Innovative Impact Measurement: Creating standardised, multi-dimensional measurement instruments that can quantify economic, social, psychological, and political empowerment in

varied situations while still being aware of how empowerment is defined and understood in those situations.

Conclusion

This thorough study of women's responsibilities in community development, which combines results from new research from 2024 with known theories, shows that women's empowerment has made a lot of progress but still faces certain problems. The research shows that initiatives aimed at getting women involved in community development can have measurable positive effects on the economy, society, mental health, and politics when they are well-planned and carried out.

Key empirical insights from modern research suggest that microfinance and self-help group interventions continue to produce good outcomes on women's economic independence, with 81% of participants reporting greater financial stability when programs combine capacity-building components. Political engagement can be improved by psychological empowerment treatments and enforced representation quotas, as long as they are supported by sufficient support structures.

Nonetheless, sustainability difficulties endure across various intervention categories. Without ongoing support systems, fair pay, and a long-term commitment from the institution, initial enthusiasm generally fades. Cultural barriers that undervalue women's contributions persist as substantial impediments, necessitating thorough, enduring strategies for societal development.

The global progress review shows that there are worrying gaps in keeping promises to achieve gender equality. Even though there has been considerable progress, none of the SDG 5 benchmarks have been met around the world. Gender parity in political representation may not happen until 2063. This inequality costs the economy more than \$10 trillion a year, which makes it both a moral and an economic obligation to act quickly.

The study emphasises that empowering women is not only an issue of fairness, but also a strategic imperative for the overall and long-lasting progress of communities. When women are involved as strategic players instead of just extra participants, community development is more inclusive, meets needs, and lasts longer. This necessitates profound transformations in program frameworks, institutional attitudes, and cultural dedication to gender equality.

The evidence base now supports integrated, multi-faceted strategies that promote economic, social, and political empowerment at the same time while making sure that support structures stay in place. Policy makers, practitioners, and communities need to commit to long-term change processes that go beyond tokenistic inclusion. These processes should generate real chances for women to lead and have a real say in how their communities grow and change.

The journey towards gender equality in community development is still hard, but the information that has been gathered shows clear strategies to speed up progress. To be successful, people need to work together on many levels, from building their own skills to making changes to institutions and cultures. This work must be supported by enough resources, political will, and a strong commitment to the idea that inclusive development is the only way for communities to make long-term progress.

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