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Most significant changes from women's economic empowerment and pathways from Ugandan women in the agro-value chain

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Abstract

Traditional evaluation models often rely on predefined indicators set by program designers, limiting the ability to capture emerging and lived outcomes. This study examines the impact of Women's Economic Empowerment from beneficiaries' perspectives using the Most Significant Change approach. A qualitative exploratory study was conducted in Kampala and Wakiso, Uganda, utilizing focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and in-depth interviews among adult women who had waned off WEE support, supplemented by a literature review. Thematic analysis identified (5) significant domains of change at the waning of women's economic empowerment support, including increased responsibility, community respect, improved mental health, stronger family relations, and enhanced confidence and agency. Challenges such as polygamous relationships, competitive dynamics, and the effects of COVID-19 hindered women's empowerment outcomes. Pathways to significant change were: goal setting, peer and family support, resilience, and self-recognition of progress. Findings suggest that women's empowerment should not focus solely on economic empowerment but must also address social and political dimensions of power, participation and inclusion. Women valued respect over power. Sustainable empowerment requires the active inclusion of men to mitigate *adversarial* gender dynamics. These findings reflect the need for inclusive development approaches to attain lasting societal progress.

Keywords Women's economic empowerment, Most significant change, Backstage empowerment, Personal change, Social connectedness, Agro value chains

1 Introduction

Community change interventions are inherently complex, extending beyond the scope of controlled experiments [1]. Development work at all levels involves a dynamic interplay of multiple relationships, interactions, perspectives, and lived experiences [2]. This paper follows the widely accepted conceptualization of Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) rooted in Sen's capability approach [3], where empowerment is linked to



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an individual's ability to lead the lives they want, including access to and control over resources, opportunities, assets, skills, and information, which together constitute human agency (by the individual engaging with the social structure), resources and achievements [4, 5].

Evidence shows that empowering women economically is essential for not only human rights, but also for achieving broader development goals, such as economic growth, poverty reduction, improved health outcomes, higher levels of education, violence prevention and overall socio-economic welfare [6, 7]. Organizations have taken initiatives to support WEE [8] and increasingly recognize that empowering women economically benefits not only women but society as a whole [9, 10]. For example, when women are economically empowered, they are more likely to realize their rights and achieve personal goals, thereby promoting human rights and community well-being, which in turn reduces poverty [6].

Women's economic empowerment is a multifaceted and dynamic concept that defies simple quantitative, linear models and approaches. As such, using a universal, deterministic set of quantitative indicators for every WEE intervention would not provide a complete picture of the participant experience. This understanding highlights the need for adaptive, innovative approaches to the design and evaluation of WEE interventions, particularly through the use of flexible models and techniques. This paper draws on the Most Significant Change (MSC) approach, which emerged as a response to the inadequacies of conventional monitoring approaches, especially in contexts where outcome and program impacts are difficult to quantify. The MSC approach focuses more on learning rather than merely accountability, identifying emerging outcomes to inform future program design [11]. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived meaning of WEE through an interpretive phenomenological analysis to generate insights of Ugandan women involved in the agriculture value chain regarding what they viewed as the most significant changes in their lives and how these changes were realized.

1.1 The most significant changes approach to program evaluation

Traditional quantitative methods are useful, but do not provide a complete picture and may lead a researcher to overlook emerging phenomena related to a program. This is because of their limited capacity to provide comprehensive evidence, learning, and understanding since they focus only on predetermined variables and questions that can be controlled, measured, and counted. Yet, not everything that counts is countable [12].

Consequently, non-quantifiable evaluation approaches, such as Collaborative outcomes reporting, offer valuable strategies for exploring the nuance of participant experiences before, during, and after participating in a program [13–15] for individuals, communities and groups. The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is a robust evaluation method that compares predefined indicators with the success stories and achievements identified by beneficiaries. This approach focuses on the learning process rather than merely on accountability [11], making it especially useful when examining changes in people's lives and understanding how programs facilitate those changes.

The MSC method relies on collected narratives that address (i) who was involved, (ii) when the change occurred, (iii) why the change was important and (iv) how the change was attained [11, 16, 17]. These narratives serve as participatory evaluation indicators.

The MSC narratives reveal what can be learned from the MSC stories [11, 18], including measuring intangibles such as inclusion.

Unlike conventional quantitative indicator-based evaluation methods that prioritize counting to accountability, MSC approaches emphasize learning what beneficiaries consider significant, assessing those insights against predetermined objectives and indicators. This approach critiques centralist biases in development by foregrounding the perspectives of beneficiaries. Participants used storytelling by sharing personal accounts from intervention-related changes. These stories were then systematically analysed and interpreted by the team and verified to determine their authenticity and significance. The main departure here was that the evaluation was participant-led, systematic, allowed feedback, enabled learning for deeper insights into WEE and was likely to support better interventions in the future. In this way, MSC is not a theoretical framework but a practical tool to conduct a more robust program evaluation by evaluating intervention outcomes from the beneficiaries' point of view [11, 19–21].

This paper complements Norman Long's actor-oriented perspective [22], which highlights the importance of assessing and documenting the relevance of intervention from the beneficiary's perspective. Unlike conventional, quantitative survey-based evaluations, the MSC approach seeks to understand what made sense to the beneficiaries and what they value. The MSC approach is particularly effective when: (i) interventions are highly participatory, (ii) focus is more on learning than mere accountability, (iii) the outcomes of an intervention cannot be accurately and precisely predicted, (iv). Linear planning and outcomes vary widely across beneficiaries, making standardization difficult. In this way, MSC is complementary and could capture a more holistic experience of program participants.

Social change projects often face difficulties in proving the value and impact of their work based solely on pre-defined indicators [23, 24]. This is particularly true for Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) interventions, where the complexity of WEE and its context of social connectedness through social networks complicate direct quantitative measurement [25].

Partly, this is because community change and development often rely on relationship building and social connectedness, two elements that do not easily lend themselves to quantitative measurement. To the best of our knowledge, the MSC approach to the evaluation of women's economic empowerment in the agricultural sector has not been previously used in Uganda.

2 Material and method

2.1 Study design, sampling and data collection

We adopted a qualitative, participatory, exploratory research design grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology. The MSC approach prioritized context, social phenomena (including people and place), culture, and meaning-making within the frameworks of Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE). The study participants were women aged 18 years and older who had previously participated in WEE interventions but had completed the program and had transitioned to self-sufficiency. Data was also collected from WEE beneficiaries through their telling their stories of change. We used key informant interview guides to collect data from key actors, including representatives from the Private Sector Foundation (PSFU), the Uganda Women Entrepreneurs Association

Table 1 A description of the domain and location of study participants

Division/municipality	2 participants per domain	Participants per municipality
Makindye	2 × 1	2
Rubaga	2 × 1	2
Kawempe	2 × 1	2
Kira	2 × 1	2
Entebbe	2 × 1	2
Nansana	2 × 1	2
Total		24

*Participants were farmers, wholesalers, suppliers of agro-inputs and merchandisers of agro products

(UWEAL), and community development officers from February 4th -2024-11th July 2024. Purposive sampling was used to select 2 participants for each change domain, resulting in a total of 24 interviews with women in the agro-value chain (i.e., *farmers, wholesalers, suppliers of agro-inputs, and merchandisers of agro products*). These interviews were conducted across six municipalities across Kampala (the capital city of Uganda) and Wakiso, which forms part of the greater Kampala metropolitan area. Data were collected from the 6 (six) municipalities of: *Makindye (n = 4 participants)*, *Rubaga (n = 4 participants)*, *Kawempe (n = 4 participants)*; *Kira (n = 4 participants)*, *Entebbe (n = 4 participants)* and *Nansana (n = 4 Participants)*. See Table 1.

Uganda is a developing landlocked country in East Africa famous for its beauty and diverse ecosystem, including being the source of the Nile River, as well as being part of the great freshwater Lake Victoria and the famous Nile perch and tilapia fish species. Kampala and Wakiso were chosen because they are the most densely populated, most urbanized, and most heterogeneous areas of Uganda and continue to expand [26]. These same areas have also witnessed most poverty alleviation modalities by both state and non-state actors, including the National Women Councils (NWC), Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP), Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Association Limited (UWEAL), and the Youth Livelihood Program, which have all not been evaluated from the beneficiary perspective. Secondary literature was collected from peer-reviewed publications, reports, and grey literature about WEE [26].

2.2 Study approach

This was an intensive one-on-one exercise with women, especially premised on the fact that people tend to open up and tell their stories when they have enough time and space to talk [27], while also taking things at their own pace [28], to explore the meanings as experienced by the people themselves [29]. This approach helped in avoiding the common trap of merely reporting and producing 'expected' accounts of change. We used the beneficiary view (*emic approach*) in assessing and documenting what was considered most significant or the long-lasting outcomes of WEE interventions, as well as the pathways to these outcomes. After each interview, key insights were summarized for each participant in order to ensure that their narratives were correctly captured. This

provided an opportunity for participants to correct or expand their narratives regarding the most significant change and related pathways to change.

2.3 Data analysis

Each reported MSC account was analyzed by the respective change domain before being analyzed for verification, transcription, and screening involving the following;

- i. The change(s) or outcomes have been evident and verifiable.
- ii. Reasons why the participant viewed the change as important.
- iii. Participants' perspectives on the pathways through which the change was achieved and what factors contributed to the outcomes.
- iv. Participants' perspectives on the role of the WEE intervention and support in achieving the described change.

Data was from women involved in the agricultural production and services sector (agro-value chain) ranging from raw agricultural production, supplies, inputs, processing/ value addition and retailing to consumers. We analysed through cycles of hermeneutic coding, reading, reflective writing, and interpretation [30]. Meaning-making involved the rigorous, organized process of data interpretation to trace and find patterns, themes and underlying meanings in the proper context so as to inform the right understanding. The meaning was then extracted from the lay concepts and notions as expressed by participants, where chunks of relevant information were processed through coding, sorting, sifting, and plotting in a matrix in the form of themes that, in turn, underwent several reviews to help deal with the multiple realities and constructions through meaning-making that connected to significance in their lives. From the several reviews and readings, the true essence of meaning(s) emerged from the dialectics of the text. Secondary literature was analyzed by thematic-discourse analysis [31–34]. The final interpretation came from a fusion of the context and text in the perspective of meanings, lived experiences, occasions, events, and conditions as understood by the participants. This enabled the identification of themes through interpretive phenomenology and verification of domain hierarchies before reporting *what was most significant*. The goal of this qualitative approach was to amplify the voices of the women participants [35, 36].

2.4 Ethical approval and accordance

The study was cleared by the TASO Research Ethics Committee (TASO-2023-254) and UNCST (SS2141ES) for accreditation before data collection. Approval was in accordance with all foundational principles of research including the respect for human dignity, voluntariness, confidentiality, community and participant engagement and promoting social responsibility. These standards were followed through particularly with sensitivity to power dynamics, inequality, safety, intersectionality and meaningful consultation that aimed at challenging normative assumptions aimed at empowerment in the study context. These results shall be responsibly disseminated with the study community and stakeholders as an exercise in promoting social good. Participation in the study was purely voluntary. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all study participants before participating in the study. In order to ensure the anonymity of participants, we assigned each a logarithmic code starting with P (Participant), KI (Key Informant) or F (Focus Group), that ended with a number in series, for example, *PX08*.

3 Results

The results are presented according to the 5 domains. We also report findings of pathways to the achieved significant change as derived from the economic empowerment. Female participants described the changes they experienced in terms of (a) providing a solution to a perceived or existing problem, (b) desirability, and (c) verifiable outcomes. We found 5 themes across the interviews.

3.1 Theme 1: taking on new responsibilities, community respect and increased participation

Participants reported taking on new responsibilities in their communities, especially in leadership.

I am now part of the many activities in the market and community. When there is a need for advice and financial contribution, I am among those to be asked first... this was not the case before. The support I have received over the years is part of this. In the process, I am now recognized by both the young and old.

– POP4

Significant achievements were also linked to a renewed sense of purpose that was visible during interviews.

I now have new roles and have better relationships with colleagues in the community; I feel socially connected and networked since the community thinks I have ideas relating to the welfare of women...I now feel that I am a valued member of this community.

– PWQ3'

The above findings speak to beneficiary satisfaction linked to the ability to contribute to personal and community development as a result of taking part in WEE activities.

3.2 Theme 2: enhanced mental health through ability to Meet basic needs

Participants noted an improvement in their mental well-being; this was in relation to less worry and less stress. The lack of options and inability to meet basic needs were related to stress and anxiety as an undesired effect of a lack of resources to provide for their basic needs. On the other hand, when there were means to meet basic needs, women were relieved from this burden.

My life is getting better, especially mentally since I am now less stressed. I no longer worry about basic things like food, medicine, and school fees. I am now happier...

– PY17

Other respondents mentioned that greater community engagement through the acquired skills in WEE, such as taking on new roles in the community, were a further means of empowerment fulfilment.

Many people admire me now and see me as a role model... I now attend meetings as a woman of value in my community... I am now a happy person... The community recommended me to undertake a course in human rights awareness. I think this is because they now believe in me.

– PM11

3.3 Theme 3: improved household and gender relations

Many (41%) reported that they were happier within their families, and improved relationships with family members and spouses, since completing with the support from WEE interventions. Some women (8%) reported better parenting outcomes especially more family time for attending to children and family functions, due to a greater ability to meet basic needs for the children, leading to improved overall family welfare. Specifically, there was improved communication between spouses that facilitated the delegation and equal sharing of responsibilities, even in undertaking major decisions such as spending large amounts of money and asset acquisition. Some (6%) married study participants reported that their husbands were now more respectful, engaging, and more open in their plans, fears and goings on in terms of trust and openness. A few (3%) women had stepped into more effective resource negotiation in their households and communities. This, we opine, went on to inform better gender awareness, especially in responding to sources of disadvantage that derive from negative gender norms and stereotyping that tend to relegate women in both the domestic and community spheres. One FGD participant quipped thus:

‘It does not matter anymore who does what at home. We all (me and my husband) now know who is able to do what. I get a better sense of myself when he asks my opinion and thanks me for the feedback and opinion. - FG32.

Another participant in the same FGD asserted that;

I have sometimes spent money in the absence of my husband, and he is ok with it. He sometimes asks me where he should spend the money. On his part, to my surprise; he has taken care of our children when I am away. I no longer worry about the status of our children because I know someone has got them covered. ‘We are now a team because he knows that I am his partner, and I can think through and make good decisions. We are now collaborators and mates for development... we have broken down the walls of ignorance and incompetence. I wish this had happened earlier!

– FG35

Another participant noted that;

These days, I even assign roles to men. This did not easily happen. With time, I am now able to supervise men and even treat them well. They thank me for treating them well.

– FG33

This speaks to notions and acceptance of shared headship in domestic and financial matters. These findings may point to the trend towards the changing harmful gender norms of masculine dominance, especially the occurrence of male money management, where women tend to be marginalized in the resource management domain. Other participants narrated;

I now realize that the future is good for all of us, especially that we now have more to work with... Working together; as a team consolidates the available resources and

avoids wastage. I know we shall reach far given that we have big dreams. We now work together. Our joint efforts are a big asset.

PG16

Me and my husband are now partners in the real sense of the word beyond husband and wife. We are friends, colleagues and confidants. My husband has been able to see achievements and values me more than before. This was not the case before. This has changed my position in the household and the community.

– PF42

3.4 Theme 4: voicing of women's concerns outside of the household and being part of the development agenda

Women participants in the WEE intervention reported that they had both the willingness and ability to voice up concerns on matters of gender equality and social justice. The women who had championed the cause of women in these domains noted that, while this was not easy, the women and the community were willing to listen to their appeal concerning gender equality. A community leader noted that;

GBV has declined in those places where women are working closely with their husbands where 'gender respect was visible. We now see the husbands and men in these households increasingly taking on and being involved in unpaid care work.

KI02

Women reported 'choice' and 'access' to contraception that enabled reproductive choices, resulting in spacing between child births and fewer and wanted pregnancies, which all promoted women's well-being and choice in matters that affected their lives.

3.5 Theme 5: self-esteem, wellbeing and purpose of life

Study participants revealed that economic empowerment had permeated all spheres of life, including confidence among women, time management, improved well-being, and having a sense of purpose in life. FGD and IDI data presented the merits of WEE as significant both in the domestic and public domains.

I now have a better perception of self because of my economic empowerment. I am now able to keep my promises. This makes me more fulfilled and more confident. As a result, I feel safer.

KI04

I am now more confident, optimistic and able to learn from the past...the hope that I have many things within reach....

PK07

In an in-depth interview (IDI), an informant narrated that;

I now work where it pays. I sometimes turn down some business [opportunities] when they do not make sense. Some things are mere self-exploitation without meaning. I now avoid bad options and look for better options and conditions for work. I am now free from the previous overwhelming responsibilities and uncertainty that

led to a deficit of personal care. Life used to be overwhelming and very draining. I now avoid physical depletion, in the process, I get less body aches and pains. The days of going to sleep without food, even when it was there because I would be very tired, are now no more. This was previously not possible....

ID07

Another voice noted thus;

'I now know that time is a resource that has changed my life for the better. Because of that, I now bargain and negotiate better. I am able to deal with and overcome manipulation from opportunists; these are very many in life. My empowerment is for real...!

ID05

A key informant noted that, 'If you were never disempowered, you can only be powerful but not empowered...'

KI02

3.6 Setbacks to empowerment and significant change

A key setback in achieving and sustaining significant outcomes from WEE was polygamous, competitive, and untrustworthy partners. It was noted by those in such marital arrangements that polygamy was frequently a source of tension, anxiety, suspicions, mistrust, and based violence, and rife in such marital relationships. There was reported inertia in decision making, including long time lags associated with many knock-down actions that were rarely aligned with progress and peace in the home, both for the spouse(s) and children. This was associated with occasional malice (actual and perceived) from the co-wives to the woman, as one participant narrated.

'My co-wives cannot appreciate my efforts and recognize my achievements. They always want to bring me down by all means. When you navigate their schemes, they resort to malice, hatred and bad mouthing. The competition for the man' love becomes counterproductive, expensive and very unhealthy. This causes losses and economic stagnation. I would have achieved more than I have if only I had moved out of that arrangement earlier than I did...!'

PB0P

Another participant reported, *'...polygamy and all such arrangements are sometimes worse than having no resources; in the end you actually have no resources even if you had some. Those that consistently and confidently work with little, but trusting and pulling together in the long run tend to have better outcomes...'*

PZQ3

3.7 Effects of COVID-19

Several women (63%) discussed experiencing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one participant said,

'We are just building back; we were ruined by the pandemic. What I have is not what it was before COVID; some of my debtors did not pay me, others disappeared, and yet these were my clients....

RC45'

4 Pathways to most significant changes (MSCs): how was significant change achieved?

After establishing what WEE beneficiaries considered a significant change, we embarked on how this significant change had been achieved. We found that the reported strategies and pathways were neither linear nor were they actualized *by all* women in our sample. We documented those actions and strategies that informed us of their success and were highly viewed as good practices that enabled significant outcomes from WEE, as reported to be the most significant change in the lives of participants. The pathways offer valuable lessons.

4.1 Goal setting and working toward the set goals

Many women (45%) reported that goals were crucial aspects of achieving success. There was consensus on the importance of goal setting and how these were to be achieved. All respondents agreed that setting clear, achievable goals is important.

'What was important was to set (a) goal(s), and clearly define what is to be accomplished... it is important to think about what's important and what you want to achieve in both the short, medium and long-term.' PH96.

Women reported that working toward and achieving goals provided direction, meaning, and fulfilment, even after they were achieved. Setting and working toward goals had both instrumental and utilitarian functions; an end and a means to an end to life objectives that yield goal achievement.

4.2 Strategies for goal setting

Synthesis from FGDs and IDIs revealed several strategies that women used for goal setting, including writing down goals and monitoring goals. For example, one participant reported:

To keep your goals visible write them down. Seeing goals as often as possible tends to reinforce them mentally... Writing down the goals makes you more likely to do the work than merely thinking about it... The physical act of writing goals cements them in your mind....

PV19

After goal setting, the means to check on the goals by means of monitoring progress was noted as very important by participants. The need for progress monitoring was emphasized and seen as a 'register' for the work done and the milestones achieved. The monitoring of progress was categorized along the timeline set to achieve goals (short, medium, and long-term).

Sorting and categorizing goals are important.

RNZ5

Short-term goals were related to having 'quick wins

RVC5'

While also serving as

...evidence that efforts are in the right direction and therefore everything is on the right track....

PVC5

Participants reported that monitoring their progress toward goals gave them confidence and energy to set and achieve other goals.

In contrast to short-term goals, participants reported that monitoring their progress toward medium and long-term goals kept them focused even when it took more time and resources to realize the goals. This relational sense of all activities (short through medium to long term) was held together by ‘...consistency of purpose and direction.’

PW03

It was noted that sizable goals can seem overwhelming when viewed as one big task, so participants reported having success when they broke down their goals into smaller steps.

To avoid freaking out, make your goals manageable by breaking them down into smaller, bite-sized steps... this helps you to be patient... in the process, the mini-goals feel more manageable to accomplish and you build momentum with time... you can then tick off the small wins.

PX01

It became clear that small progressive steps build good habits and confidence.

4.3 Peer and family support and accountability

Another key action point leading to success and beyond empowerment was peer and family support as well as strong personal relationships. This led to and enabled ‘cheap’ learning and self-improvement through opportunities provided through these social networks in the sector, acquaintances and beyond.

... having people to ‘report’ back to made me strive to follow through....

PL12

Telling others about your goals and successes keeps you energized....

PO04

4.4 Goal communication and peer support

Inform others about the goals you’ve set.

PS09

There were voices attesting that verbalizing goals reinforces commitment and accountability. Sharing goals with a partner, family, friends, colleagues, or community groups was mentioned as one of the goal verbalization channels.

I let those that I consider significant know about my dreams and timeframes... These came in to support and encourage as I worked on my dreams.

PZ03

Asking close circle to help was viewed as capable of contributing to motivation and better focus. This was in synch and building upon the prior strategy of joining groups and associations, platforms, forums, or classes that support sector goals. Membership and active involvement in associations were a source of inspiration and accountability since these were some of the membership requirements.

Having people to report back to makes you more likely to follow through.

PS01

Time planning and having a work plan. Attaching deadlines and setting aside time to realize the set goals.

Planning was seen as a crucial ingredient in success. It was argued that, 'without planning, goals can easily be put off'.

– PC07

Scheduled and regular reviews were seen as a means to ensure commitment of time and resources. Periodic reviews enable flexibility and adjusting for a better fit, especially where goals are long-term. Planning and reviews of progress also enable accountability to oneself.

4.5 Resilience: the willingness to go on

Respondents argued that the assumption that there are no obstacles to achieving their goals was unrealistic. '*...it is better to anticipate obstacles and how to navigate them than to assume there are not huddles on the way...*'

PG09

Thinking about potential obstacles in advance was akin to strategic contingency planning, especially when all likely hurdles are considered. This approach also enabled backup plans, being ready both physically and mentally (e.g., [give examples of preparedness here]). Participants reported that their resilience was strengthened by visualizing the challenges that needed to be overcome. Anticipating difficulties and visualizing strategies to overcome them enables preemptive actions. The role of imagination was also linked to *the resilient journey*, especially the review of what is working and what's not. Another component of resilience was to accept the possibility of altering goals in cases of irrelevance and impossible obstacles. It is important to note that altering goals is not the same as quitting. As reality changes, priorities need to respond.

4.6 Rewarding oneself when a goal is achieved

Participants emphasized that success must be celebrated. 'The journey makes more meaning when there is time to count and live the success.'

FD09

The exercise of success sharing enabled self-validation, especially given rewards that serve as milestones of progress and reinforce good habits, behaviours, and commitment. Self-rewards help to stay motivated and committed by moving beyond just the work to

the post-achievement phase. 'Enjoy, celebrate the reward, and then refocus on the next target. However, this is not to go on indefinitely as a way of life.'

PF02

4.7 Setbacks are normal

Expecting and accepting occasional setbacks as part of the journey was seen as therapeutic. Women reported reframing setbacks as a part of the process of achievement and a means to highlight where more focus is needed.

When you beat yourself up over mistakes, it erodes confidence and stalls progress. Instead, reframe setbacks as opportunities to improve and gain wisdom for next time.

PZ01

5 Discussion

5.1 Summary of findings

The shared narratives by women provided important insights about empowerment through Women Economic Empowerment (WEE). This study shows that some aspects of women empowerment were subtler and not easily articulated. For example "backstage" empowerment, while not immediately visible, seemed to have liberated the participants' imaginations in non-communicable ways [37–39]. Subtle and backstage empowerment came through quiet leadership, the developing personal strengths, an inclusive environment, the fostering of skills through mentorship and training that later enabled and drove success in the public arena. This later proved to be a source, enabler and outcome of self-consciousness [40–43] that later played a significant role, especially when women were able to overcome stigma and stereotypes related to inequality. Embedded empowerment was the practical means to navigate the complex power relations that needed a broader field of vision in choice and meaning making. Women, especially mothers, put the needs of others (in the family) before their own. In cases where resources permitted, women preferred to form a separate household with decision-making autonomy, rather than join longer, financially better-off households under male or older female (most likely matriarchal) authority [44]. This dynamic reflects how WEE contributed to reshaping power and decision-making structures in families, particularly through a woman's role as a mother rather than as a wife. Therefore, cultural and structural inequalities cannot be effectively addressed by individual (micro-level) interventions alone [45].

5.2 Interpretation

Our findings showed that WEE facilitated various 'functionings' among beneficiaries, particularly in terms of personal autonomy, such as choice related to location, family size, rest, work and childcare. We argue that women's economic empowerment was not an end in itself, but a means to greater empowerment, enabling individuals to live the lives they valued so as to achieve the desired ways of 'being and doing'.

There is a need to distinguish between choices made from the vantage point of alternatives and those made when alternatives are absent or prohibitively costly. Paradoxically, some mothers noted that they would choose the higher-cost options over the low and

affordable ones as an assertion of their agency and full potential. This suggests that the concept of choice requires further refinement. First, choice necessarily implies the possibility of alternatives, the ability to have chosen otherwise. There is a logical association between poverty and disempowerment because an insufficiency of the means for meeting one's basic needs often rules out the ability to exercise meaningful choice. In subtle ways, economic power had initialized social power and translated into political power that strengthened psychological, social and political empowerment. Power was expressed not only through the exercise of agency and choice, but also through the kinds of choices made. This notion of power is a controversial one because it allows for the possibility that power and dominance can operate through consent and complicity as well as through coercion and conflict [46]. Women differ significantly in backgrounds, interests and needs. This is the basis of stratification among women [47]. Even with the dominance of patriarchy, men are not always empowered and oppressors. Some men were also being exploited by the existing power structures in society [48].

5.3 Implications

Women's empowerment needs more gender-neutral approaches to enlist men in challenging exploitative systems. There is a need for clarity and an urgent move from women vis-à-vis men or vice versa in the pursuit of empowerment. This is not to negate the need for women's empowerment and the reality of women's subordination, but rather an innovative reworking of power relations in a more complimentary framework as opposed to a dialectical conflictual manner that more often than not tends to emasculate men [49]. Empowerment is more than a mere rearranging of the available power (economic, political, social and otherwise) and resources. Sustainable WEE is therefore a shift and change in value propositions and ways of doing life, and not merely doing things. Understanding gender empowerment is more important than women's empowerment. For this to succeed, men will need gender sensitization, as women do, sometimes even more of it [50].

The transformative significance of WEE was evident in beneficiaries' ability to make strategic life choices, including active participation in decision-making processes and the exercise of agency. This study highlights the inter-dependence of individual and structural change in WEE processes, with structural factors shaping individual resources, agency, and achievements through complex power dynamics of adaptations, setting goals, being integrated and latency that enables certainty in life [51, 52]. We found evidence of current relevance in Parsonian theorizing that can inform decision-making.

These findings emphasize the point that women's empowerment is also a matter of human rights and social justice, with the empowerment of women being central for human development. Our study shows that there is a business case in WEE, beyond human rights and freedoms. In WEE endeavours (present and future), there is a need to be clear and keen to know which empowerment is being pursued; for which category/sector of women and which class, given the heterogeneity of women. WEE has both forward and backwards linkages that tend to reduce poverty (through building women's human capital and capabilities) in the community and country. In all dimensions, WEE makes a good business case. When women are empowered, communities prosper.

6 Conclusion

This study establishes what was done and achieved by beneficiaries and not the externally driven and expert-led outcomes. Our approach to WEE addresses the hitherto unaddressed inherent problems of mediated empowerment handed down through institutions and top-down methods. We posit that WEE beneficiaries themselves, through their agency, were able to achieve the changes and reckon as such rather than through the externally imposed measures and outcomes mediating the achievements [53]. Methodologically, the participatory measurement of empowerment and success by women in the agro value chain addresses some of the internal contradictions that are posed by external conceptual valuations in WEE. We contribute to the field of gender and economic sociology by positing that women's economic empowerment is an entry point into other forms of empowerment, especially as WEE does not end but simply tackles the next challenges, especially those related to equality in society. This has been an exposition of the power of qualitative evaluation and how this works. This is also a stride in southern explanations about what happens in the local context without necessarily having to check with the north for the external measurement and validation of WEE. WE regard this as part of the progressive ethics of insider (emic) beneficiary research. By giving voice to process participants, we make them visible and consequential in their own development.

6.1 Study limitations

Given that WEE interventions have different philosophies, pathways, targets and indicators across sectors and contexts, we are not able to know whether women in other sectors have the same value propositions about WEE. This means that other studies have to be conducted with larger samples for better comparison. These findings offer a basis for bigger studies for representation and comparison, where hypotheses can be tested and generalizations made. Data was enlisted through storytelling and recollections; this means that there was a possibility of recollection bias. However, our methods included validation of the accounts. Therefore, to an extent, this was minimised.

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Author contributions

Study Conceptualisation- JNK&GA; Formal analysis- JNK&DO; Critical review-JNK, DO, EWP, JM, DNL, IA&JR; Review and formatting-JO&OG.

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Data availability

All supporting data is provided in the manuscript.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was cleared by The Aids Support Organisation (TASO) Research Ethics Committee (TASO-2023-254) and Uganda National Council of Science and Technology -UNCST (SS2141ES) for accreditation before data collection. Study participants gave full and informed consent to take part in the study. Participation in the study was purely voluntary. The study was not an experiment.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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