



The influence of Uganda women's entrepreneurship program on livelihoods and cultural dynamics in Amolatar, Northern Uganda

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Keywords:

Cultural dynamics
Entrepreneurship
Gender equality
Incomes
Uganda.

Received: 7 May 2024

Revised: 22 August 2024

Accepted: 16 September 2024

Published: 2 October 2024

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Funding: This research is supported by Lira University (Grant number: RG/2023/10).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of the Lira University, Uganda has granted approval for this study on 21 December 2023 (Ref. No. LUREC-2023-73).

Transparency: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

1. Introduction

Worldwide, the main emphasis has been to bridge the gender gap as well as challenge the social customs to empower and improve women's financial status and well-being within their societies. The empowerment programs are considered to provide women with the skills, finances and support required to participate in income generating activities, improve their livelihoods while challenging the traditional gender stereotypes (Hendriks, 2019; Lawless et al., 2019; Raniga, 2022).

One of the most significant discussions in Sub-Saharan Africa is the persistence of gender inequalities through cultural norms, women's stereotypes as well as historical injustices which has limited women's access to particularly financial resources as well as opportunities to participate in income generating activities (Fernandez, 2023; Seiz, 2021). This implies that cultural norms greatly contribute in determining gender relations and participation in economic activities by the women.

In alignment with global commitments, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that emphasize gender equality and women's empowerment, the Amolatar sub-region has launched local initiatives to boost women's economic opportunities. Specifically, SDG 5 seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, highlighting how crucial women's economic empowerment is for achieving these broader goals (Afenyo-Agbe & Adeola, 2020).

In Amolatar District, women's economic empowerment initiatives—particularly the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP), introduced by the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MoGLSD)—provide tools and opportunities for increased economic participation and improved livelihoods. The program addresses the challenges women face in establishing economically viable enterprises, such as limited access to affordable credit, insufficient technical knowledge and business development skills, limited market access, and lack of information about business opportunities (MoGLSD, 2022). These programs include various activities ranging from skill development and business support to the provision of financial resources (Kabeer, 2005; Kamberidou, 2020).

The UWEP strongly emphasizes integrating vulnerable groups, such as unemployed women, single young mothers, widows, survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), women with disabilities, women living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus/ Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS), women who are heads of households, women living in slums, women in remote areas, and ethnic minorities, into its beneficiary groups (MoGLSD, 2022). This comprehensive effort tackles gender issues on multiple levels—global, regional, national, and local—aiming to empower women economically in a culturally diverse and dynamic setting.

While women's entrepreneurship programs have been successful in many regions, Amolatar's unique cultural context presents distinct challenges. The study in Amolatar reveals a divergence from the positive outcomes observed elsewhere, emphasizing the understated influence of cultural practices on the success of women's entrepreneurship programs. The complex interplay between cultural norms and economic initiatives is a key aspect that distinguishes this study, shedding light on the specific barriers faced by women in Amolatar and highlighting the need for context-specific approaches to economic empowerment.

Programs like UWEP in Amolatar clearly aim to empower women economically, but little is known about the ways in which these efforts impact lives and cultural dynamics in this specific region. While it is widely recognized that accounting for cultural context is essential (O'Donovan et al., 2020) there remains a lack of empirical studies examining these activities' indirect impacts within the distinct cultural environment of Amolatar District.

This study utilized Kabeer's Agency Theory (Kabeer (2005)) and Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu (1986)) both of which are particularly relevant in Amolatar, where traditional norms and gender roles can limit women's involvement in economic activities and decision-making. By addressing these cultural barriers and fostering active agency, programs like UWEP can help women challenge and change these deep-rooted structures, paving the way for greater social and economic progress.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Economic Impact of Women's Empowerment Initiatives, Cultural Norms and Empowerment

Exploring as well as employing women's empowerment initiatives regularly encounters challenges, making it crucial to apply a traditionally sensitive method to assess their scalability as well as sustainability. This implies that women's empowerment initiatives are a significant move of sustainable development, with the potential to create a more inclusive and equitable society in Africa.

Research by Bain, Ransom, and Halimatusa'diyah (2020) highlights the complex impacts of women's empowerment through livestock interventions, particularly in dairy farming. Their work underscores the importance of understanding how such initiatives intersect with societal norms and existing labour responsibilities. This research advocates for a context-sensitive approach in developing programs, emphasizing the need for continued research to improve the effectiveness of empowerment interventions.

Gaining a deep understanding of how cultural norms influence women's economic roles is essential for creating successful interventions in Uganda. These insights are key to developing policies and programs that not only respect cultural contexts but also empower women economically, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. Globally, researchers have explored the complex connections between women's economic empowerment and cultural factors. Kabeer (2005) stresses that cultural norms significantly shape women's economic opportunities, arguing that interventions must navigate these complexities. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work; instead, interventions should account for cultural specificity, intersectionality, and the evolving nature of culture.

3. Method

Qualitative interpretive framework as well phenomenological research design was employed in this study. The study involved 28 participants through purposive sampling while basing on the principle of saturation. Data was collected through key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussion and document review. Open ended questions were used during interview process and document review was used to triangulate interview data. The study generated six themes.

3.1. Ethical Consideration

- Ethical Review and approval by Lira University Research Ethics Committee, LUREC, Number LUREC-2023-73 and Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), Number SS2635ES. Before commencing the research, the researcher submitted a detailed research proposal to the Lira University Research Ethics Committee for approval. The process was followed by seeking permission and community entry through District Community Development Office which coordinates UWEP in Amolatar District.
- Informed Consent: Participants were provided with informed consent, understood the research purpose, procedures, and their rights. This research had low risk to the study participants because it was conducted within Amolatar Town council and Arwotcek-sub-county facilities respectively where women always hold their meetings. This research was been approved by LUREC and UNCST. The researcher was responsible for ethical conduct of this research.
- Confidentiality: Anonymity and confidentiality were assured to protect participants' identities and data.
- Cultural Sensitivity: Local cultural norms and customs were respected at all stages of the research, including interactions with participants and interpretation of findings.

4. Findings and Discussion

Women's empowerment and improved livelihood through UWEP and be understood through six scopes: women's economic growth, job creation, changing cultural perceptions, financial empowerment, sustainability and future prospects and social transformation.

4.1. UWEP and Women's Economic Growth

The research findings indicate that taking part in the Women's Entrepreneurship Program has significantly boosted the income in from farming in rice, millet and tomatoes as well as financial security of female participants. By providing them with essential skills, resources, and support, UWEP has empowered women entrepreneurs to establish successful businesses, enhance their standard of living, and contribute to economic development. This highlights the significance of investing in women's entrepreneurship programs to promote inclusive economic growth and empowerment. A 49-year-old woman, a farmer, trained by UWEP on vocational skills, teamwork and business (how to make cosmetics, smearing oil, work in groups and improve business to become large) shared her experience that:

"Currently, I'm farming in rice. UWEP trained us on how to acquire funds and use it appropriately in farming. UWEP contributed to improvement to my life. Though sometimes when there is a lot of sunshine, output of the farm proceeds is not good. However, there the recent harvest was okay" (In-depth Interview (IDI) 49-year-old woman farmer).

Meanwhile, another 40-year-old woman, a farmer, trained by UWEP on farming especially rice stated that: "*UWEP has improved my life very well. I get money, I use to send my children to school. Some I use for feeding at home. Helps me in different ways*" (IDI 49-year-old woman farmer).

In addition, a 34-year-old business woman, trained by UWEP on vocational skills, teamwork and business (how to make cosmetics, smearing oil) contended that: UWEP raised me up. My business was low. I have a cow, goat sheep and some birds. UWEP helped my business I used money for paying fees UWEP helped my business which was low. Now I make shampoo and sell to people, I used to buy. I have bought land (FGD business woman).

The remarks provided by the above three women acknowledge that UWEP training has been beneficial in teaching women how to access funds and manage them effectively in their farming and business activities. This suggests that the program has successfully empowered them with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the financial aspects of agriculture and businesses, which is crucial for sustainable farming, business practices and bridging the gender gap. This concurs with Kapoor (2019) argument that, the emphasis on education, skill training, and equitable chances demonstrates a systematic approach to tackling long-standing gender inequities. The women's statement on improved life and being raised up indicates that UWEP has contributed to the improvement of their economic status. In turn, the women can now afford expand their businesses, send their children to school, cater for the family welfare and acquire assets such as land. The above data corroborate the findings of a recent study by Agrawal, Gandhi, and Khare (2021) which revealed that women who are empowered not only increase their own well-being, but they also have a good impact on their families, communities, and general social stability. In the same, the voices above are in line with Kabeer (2005). Kabeer's views that women should engage in transformative development as active agents not passive

participants and that bridging gender gaps requires changes that serve women's strategic gender interests, for example, abolition of gender division of labour and unequal control over resources. This highlights the socio-economic benefits derived from participating in the program, indicating that UWEP has played a role in enhancing the individual's economic situation and possibly their overall quality of life. However, the P1s statement mentioned on challenges faced during farming, such as the adverse effects of excessive sunshine on crop yields is indicative that despite the training received through UWEP, external factors like weather conditions still pose challenges to agricultural productivity.

4.2. UWEP and Job Creation

There is evidence of job creation through group initiatives and engagement in economic activities. However, there are also perceptions of ongoing challenges and uncertainties regarding the extent to which women are independently creating formal job opportunities.

Regarding job creation, the women explained how the UWEP promotes group activities for employment. They are involved in bakery and hotel ventures, as well as collaborating to support each other's businesses and reallocate labour resources. Additionally, the women engage in economic activities such as farming, selling produce, and managing household chores, and they hire additional help for more complex tasks.

A 28-YEAR-old woman doing bakery business asserted that:

UWEP has done us a lot. Yeah, there are jobs I can say that coz when you're in a group at least you go and get something from there and that is already an opportunity- job opportunity. You go and at least do something like our group is doing bakery... yeah, I have seen one of the groups, they have started a hotel and they have employed also those ones and, in the group, they can be in the hotel and when one also has a business so they decide to put another person in that business and they come for this one in the group (IDI business woman).

Similarly, another retired teacher Observed that:

Yes, others have created jobs, see, in most cases when these women go to the market to sell their produce sometimes, they engage other people to dig on their behalf so somebody has already gone to the market and sometimes you leave very early in the morning and then you engage somebody help, some have also engaged other people to help in family activities. That's what I have seen (IDI 62-year-old).

Participants in FGDs shared their experiences of benefiting from UWEP:

"Yesterday people helped me transplant tomatoes".

"I gave people to weed so that work moves"

"Work that is beyond my energy I give people to help in a day because I have the money now".

"UWEP helps me with farming. I pay for ox plough".

"People help spray my rice garden. Pay as you go".

The three women's voices deliberate how UWEP has facilitated job creation, particularly among women. They mention starting a bakery business and hiring others for market tasks. The findings align with previous global studies, where initiatives aim to provide women with the knowledge, resources, and support needed to actively participate in economic activities and improve their livelihoods (Hendriks, 2019; Lawless et al., 2019; Raniga, 2022).

4.3. UWEP and Changing Cultural Perceptions

While some cultures actively support women's work and financial independence, others still present obstacles such as limited understanding among leaders and persistent issues like domestic violence. Despite recognizing potential challenges such as shifts in household dynamics or behavioral changes, there is a general trend toward promoting women's empowerment and economic participation, albeit with caution and awareness of cultural sensitivity. In an in-depth interview, a participant a 49-year-old woman said that: "Culture allows women to work, does not stop women from joining groups" (IDI rice farmer).

A 58-year-old argued that: "They are now respecting women; people are now respecting women, when they go to the market, they come back with something" (IDI Chairperson women council).

4.4. UWEP and Changing Cultural Perceptions. IDIs Manifestation

Interviewer: And culture tells them that you should actually be at home.

IDI: That's what culture says that women should but the cultures are also changing now because we now have leaders who are informed and they know what it means by women now participating in activities that can generate income for the family. So, men sometimes they can still their money and you know when the money is stolen from you, it causes you problems, payment becomes a problem but what I know is women are actually the best in business and even saving money.

Interviewer: So, you think there are no cultural obstacles that have.

IDI: In some cultures, yes but me in my clan no, we don't support that.

Interviewer: You support your women to work.

IDI: We encourage women to go for work, generate money, take children to school, develop their families, that is what we are for.

Interviewer: I didn't ask you, are you a cultural leader?

IDI: Yes, am a cultural leader.

Interviewer: Ohh that's good and you are the right person to tell me. So, you think other cultures are obstacles.

IDI: Yeah, some are obstacles, you know the cultural leaders are now changing but, in the past, we used to have cultural leaders who have stopped in primary, they are not informed, they don't know many things actually so in such cultures where you have someone with a limited information, they are obstacles.

Interviewer: They stop their women from working?

IDI: They stop women, the beating is still going on in other cultures where women are beaten and there is nobody talks about it, they just leave it like that but in my culture, we are not encouraging that, whenever we sit for meetings, we actually encourage men to actually cooperate with their women, give their women time to interact with other people and to do business (IDI a 62-year-old woman and a Graduate Teacher).

A 38-year-old woman stated:

If the woman is going for example on me am a councillor, sometimes I may be called somewhere and go back and get the man has changed the mood. That is also some culture for some culture. The good thing, women can help them to uplift their home even. Then the poor thing also some women if they get a lot of money, they change their characters and start having extra marital affairs ("cako mit") meaning infidelity. But in our culture that one is not there though it can also happen (Key Informant Interview (KII) Woman Councillor).

The interview voices demonstrate a deep understanding of the evolving cultural attitudes towards women's roles and the challenges they encounter. The above voices of highlight a positive shift in perceptions of women's participation in the workforce, emphasizing growing respect for women's economic contributions. The statement aligns with [Cislaghi et al. \(2019\)](#) report, which provides evidence that cultural norms are evolving and interventions that take the cultural context into account can effectively enhance women's economic empowerment in Africa. This suggests that cultural norms are not static and can be positively influenced through targeted interventions. Additionally, concerns about changes in behaviour and infidelity indicate a cultural sensitivity and understanding of how economic empowerment can impact social dynamics within households and communities. It emphasizes the need for careful consideration and support mechanisms to navigate these potential challenges while effectively promoting women's empowerment ([Bourdieu, 1986](#); [Gilleard, 2020](#); [Kabeer, 2005](#)).

4.5. UWEP and Financial Empowerment

A 34-year-old woman asserted her experience that: "*UWEP helped me pay school fees and increase stock. Helped me in improving business which was low, bought a fridge according to how a restaurant should be. I bought and built iron roofed house*" (IDI business woman).

In addition, a participant in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) demonstrated her experience on financial empowerment through UWEP that:

UWEP picked me from a low level. Before I used to farm and use for subsistence and donation from friends. I was shy to go to the market. Later, I was trained by UWEP. When I got the training my level improved. I planted onions and got four (4).

Bags of rice yet there were only ten (10) ridges... The quality was good. My male partner did not allow me. He didn't support me before but the money changed his mind. Later I planted tomatoes, he helped me. Now as I talk, I have built a house, bought a motorcycle, and saved. Now I'm taking care of poultry, piggery helped us build (FGD).

Another participant in the FGD added that:

UWEP, if it was a person, I would greet. My husband had just died. I looked like an animal. I resurrected; my health improved. I used money to buy pigs, one male and five female. I got piglets. I paid my son in school. I have put my house like I'm not a widow. I am happy I fit among my friends. I was tired of farming (FGD).

The insights shared the participants in the focus group discussions emphasize the significant positive impact of the UWEP on financial empowerment and socioeconomic progress to women. UWEP provided essential financial support for education, business expansion, and infrastructure development, resulting in noticeable improvements in the lives of the women. Additionally, the program brought about a change in gender dynamics within households, empowering women and gaining support from male partners. Beyond the economic advantages, UWEP contributed to the emotional well-being of the participants, promoting resilience and community integration. The recent report by [Agrawal et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Kabeer \(2005\)](#) confirms that empowering women leads to a positive impact on their own well-being, families, communities, and social stability.

4.6. UWEP, Sustainability and Future Prospects

The findings emphasize the confidence of women beneficiaries in sustaining their businesses after receiving support from UWEP, highlighting the need for ongoing support for others. They recognize the importance of the revolving loan but have concerns about potential business failure without continued support. It is essential to provide diverse assistance beyond finances, prepare for project transition, and continuously monitor to ensure sustainability. While low default rates are noted, challenges persist regarding the adequacy of loans for long-term viability.

In an in-depth interview, several women shared their experiences about sustainability and future prospects of their businesses should UWEP programme comes to an end.

For example, a participant emphasised that: *“Yes, we are ready to continue with the business we started assuming the UWEP people go. However, we are praying that they may continue to help women as it is a revolving loan, other women are still there that they should also get this money”*(IDI, a 49-year-old woman and rice farmer).

A 40-year-old said:

The women will, how can I say.....*“Mon dong adongo”* She expects a lot of growth and development of women in the next few years. But if this programme stops, no I don't think the business will continue. We already have capital but we keep revolving. It can help us but sometime we run low in the income and we still need UWEP to be there (IDI, business woman).

A 62-year-old:

Ummm! I know some may continue but others may not. Others may fail...Anyway depending on the duration they have worked with UWEP, if they have taken a longer time then they know how to manage but if it's a short period of time others may fall back. In my opinion I would suggest they continue to give them more morale/support and also give them those skills. One is that financial support and maybe can provide them with other say those ones who engage in agricultural activities, can give them equipment maybe the hoes, ox-ploughs or if UWEP can manage to give them some animals so that they can begin from there (IDI Graduate Teacher).

A 66-year-old woman:

I hope that, at the very least, they should be given a limited amount of time to be informed that the project will be paused during this period. This way, they can continue to receive payment until the project is discontinued and support themselves. They should be informed about when the project will stop (IDI retired medical personnel).

The key informant explained that:

In Amolatar town council, there are no serious defaulters for the UWEP, and payments are going well. In my opinion, the UWEP loan given is not enough to sustain a business. For example, if you want to start a well-equipped salon, it would cost more than 1 million. Before accessing the loan, we provide them with some financial literacy training to help them manage their finances. After receiving the loan, we always monitor and evaluate their progress. If necessary, we provide refresher training in areas where they are not doing well (KII).

The above voices indicate that UWEP program has been a significant support for women entrepreneurs, enabling them to sustain their businesses independently if the program ends. The findings are consistent with the focus of Sustainable Development Goal 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. This highlights the crucial role of women's economic empowerment in realizing these broader objectives (Afenyo-Agbe & Adeola, 2020). However, participants have also expressed concerns about the program's ability to support their businesses during periods of low income due to ongoing capital needs and fluctuating income for the sake of sustainability and future success of their businesses beyond UWEP project duration. They have also emphasized the need for continuous support and skill-building initiatives to improve business resilience.

4.7. UWEP and Social Transformation

Findings show that UWEP has not only improved women's economic status and their livelihoods, but it has also changed social norms.

A 62-year-old explained his cultural experiences on UWEP and social transformation:

...women are not only transforming their livelihoods but also catalysing social change, challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes..... this program is not just about financial gains; it has reshaped societal norms, fostered a culture of equality, and paved the way for social transformation in Amolatar... (IDI and a Cultural Leader).

Similarly, a 49-year-old woman shared similar experience, *“UWEP has brought a lot of changes, women have a lot of strength, households have developed, children are nurtured well, and life is better now”* (IDI and rice farmer).

The above voices show that UWEP has greatly contributed in promoting an inclusive and just society to women and their communities by breaking down structural and cultural barriers. To illustrate, UWEP is not only about improvement of women's economic status, it's also empowering women to challenge traditional gender roles in turn contributing to wider social changes. This empowerment is seen in women having more

control over their lives, better livelihoods, and improved family well-being, as highlighted by Kabeer (2005). However, it's crucial to make sure these positive changes are sustainable.

A study by Bassey and Bubu (2019) highlights how cultural practices can sometimes reinforce gender inequalities, while Iannaccone (2022) offers examples of communities supporting women's entrepreneurship, demonstrating that cultural norms are gradually evolving. This suggests that thoughtfully designed interventions have the potential to shift cultural attitudes and open up more opportunities for women in Africa, including Uganda.

5. Conclusion

The article explored UWEP's impact on women's lives and the cultural dynamics within their communities. UWEP has significantly empowered women by providing education, skill training, and access to funding, enabling them to succeed in agriculture and business. From Kabeer's perspective, this form of empowerment is vital, as it not only improves women's economic status but also challenges traditional gender roles, leading to broader social change. The program has created job opportunities for women by encouraging entrepreneurship and addressing unemployment. Although some participants express doubts about the program's ability to foster sustainable businesses, many have observed a positive shift in cultural attitudes toward women in the workforce. Despite facing challenges such as cultural barriers and agricultural risks from weather conditions, UWEP has brought notable improvements to the lives of women, their families, and their communities. However, concerns remain about the sustainability of these businesses once the program concludes. Ongoing support, continuous skill-building efforts, and clear communication are crucial to ensuring lasting empowerment and inclusivity for marginalized groups.

6. Recommendations

UWEP positively impacts women's economic status by providing crucial skills such as financial literacy and business training, as well as offering resources and support for agricultural ventures. However, challenges like unpredictable weather still hinder productivity. To combat this, the study suggests introducing weather resilience training, promoting sustainable farming practices, implementing supportive policies, and establishing monitoring systems.

To assist women in transitioning from group-based activities to independent businesses, the study recommends creating more women-led job opportunities through targeted support, including access to financial resources, specialized training programs, and mentorship.

The study also underscores the importance of incorporating culturally sensitive approaches within UWEP. This strategy would address the intricate relationship between cultural norms and gender dynamics, enhancing the program's effectiveness across various cultural settings.

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