

Women Empowerment and Social Transformation in Informal Settlements: A Case of the Uplift Project in Kangemi Slums, Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

Women in informal settlements face multiple socio-economic challenges that limit their ability to participate fully in community development and decision-making. This study explored the influence of economic empowerment on social transformation of women in Women Uplift Project Kangemi Slums, Nairobi. The study was anchored on theory of empowerment. The study adopted descriptive survey design. The study targets 250 participants comprising of 200 women and 10 Key informants. The study sampled 190 women respondents and 10 Key informants. Questionnaires and interview guide was used to collect data. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive methods using SPSS software, while qualitative data from interviews were thematically analyzed. Findings were presented in tables and narratives. The study revealed that women's empowerment in Kangemi Slums enhanced financial independence, confidence. The study revealed that women empowerment in informal settlements in Kangemi Slums significantly enhanced women's livelihoods, household decision-making, and overall community well-being. Access to income-generating activities, credit facilities, and financial autonomy enabled women to build resilience and foster social transformation, demonstrating that targeted interventions in informal settlements can strengthen women's agency despite persistent structural challenges. The study recommended to expand vocational training, provide microfinance support, and promote policies supporting women-owned enterprises to sustain empowerment and social change.

Keywords: *Women Empowerment, Economic Empowerment, Social Transformation, Informal Settlements, Kangemi Slums*

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment has emerged as a cornerstone of global development, widely acknowledged for its role in advancing gender equality, reducing poverty, and promoting inclusive economic progress. Key international frameworks including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) have underscored the importance of improving women's access to education, healthcare, economic resources, and political representation to tackle enduring gender imbalances (UN Women, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

Across the African continent, regional instruments such as Agenda 2063 by the African Union, the Maputo Protocol (2003), and the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004) have reinforced commitments to advancing women's rights and empowerment. Yet, despite

these policy milestones, substantial gaps persist especially in informal urban settlements where women contend with layered vulnerabilities stemming from poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and marginalization from governance systems (African Development Bank, 2021).

In Kenya, the journey toward women's empowerment has been influenced by a complex interplay of historical, political, and socio-cultural factors that have long shaped gender relations. Significant legislative and policy milestones, such as the enactment of the 2010 Constitution, the adoption of the National Gender and Development Policy (2000), and the introduction of the Affirmative Action Social Development Fund (2015), were designed to enhance gender equity and expand opportunities for women in economic, social, and political spheres. Despite these progressive frameworks, the reality for many women, particularly those residing in informal settlements, remains challenging. They continue to encounter deeply entrenched structural and cultural barriers that restrict their access to productive resources, economic opportunities, and meaningful participation in civic and leadership roles (Ogwora, 2022). These persistent inequalities underscore the need for targeted interventions that go beyond legal provisions to address practical gender needs and promote transformative empowerment at the grassroots level.

Kenya's informal settlements, which accommodate a significant proportion of urban residents, present unique challenges to women's empowerment. These areas are characterized by high poverty levels, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to healthcare, and insecure tenure, conditions that disproportionately affect women due to their primary caregiving roles and economic vulnerabilities (KNBS, 2022; UN-Habitat, 2020). Women in these communities often depend on low-paying informal jobs, lack collateral for credit, and have minimal access to formal financial services, which hinders their ability to invest in income-generating activities (World Bank, 2021; FSD Kenya, 2020). Furthermore, patriarchal norms and gender-based violence remain pervasive, limiting women's agency and decision-making power both within households and in the public sphere (Mutinda & Mwangi, 2023; Ogwora, 2022). Consequently, empowerment programs targeting informal settlements must address these multi-dimensional barriers to create sustainable socio-economic transformation (African Development Bank, 2021).

Kangemi Slum, located on the western outskirts of Nairobi along the Waiyaki Way corridor, epitomizes the structural and socio-economic challenges facing urban informal settlements in Kenya. The area is marked by high poverty levels, with a significant proportion of residents living below the national poverty line, compounded by inadequate housing, poor sanitation, and limited access to clean water and healthcare services (KNBS, 2019; Nairobi City County Government, 2020). Economic opportunities remain scarce, forcing many women to rely on low-paying and unstable informal sector jobs such as domestic work, petty trade, and casual labor, which offer minimal social protection and income security (World Bank, 2021; FSD Kenya, 2020). These conditions perpetuate financial dependency and restrict upward mobility, while low educational attainment and entrenched gender norms further marginalize women. Additionally, gender-based violence, both domestic and community-based, remains pervasive, undermining women's sense of safety and autonomy (Mutinda & Mwangi, 2023; Ogwora, 2022). These

interlocking vulnerabilities severely limit women's capacity to achieve financial independence and actively participate in local governance and development processes.

Despite these challenges, Kangemi have witnessed gradual yet uneven socio-economic transformation driven by community-based initiatives, non-governmental organizations, and government interventions targeting poverty reduction and gender equity. Programs focusing on vocational training, microfinance, and self-help groups have enabled some women to diversify income sources and transition from survival-based activities to small-scale entrepreneurship (FSD Kenya, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2021). Social transformation is also evident in the growing participation of women in community leadership roles, advocacy groups, and local savings cooperatives, which foster collective bargaining power and enhance social capital (Kenya Gender and Equality Commission, 2022). However, these gains remain fragile due to structural inequalities, limited access to credit, and policy gaps that fail to adequately integrate women in informal settlements into mainstream economic frameworks (World Bank, 2021; African Development Bank, 2022). Therefore, while positive shifts are occurring, achieving sustainable socio-economic transformation demands integrated strategies that address both economic empowerment and social inclusion at multiple levels.

Although various empowerment initiatives such as microfinance programs and short-term interventions have been introduced, many have fallen short due to fragmented strategies that overlook deeper structural and cultural issues (Ndungu, 2020). The Women Uplift Project in Kangemi presents a more holistic approach, addressing economic, educational, political, and environmental aspects of empowerment. However, there remains a lack of robust empirical data to assess its long-term impact on sustainable social transformation. As such, the current study intended to examine the purpose of this study was to examine the role of women empowerment in driving social transformation within informal settlements, using the Uplift Project in Kangemi Slums, Nairobi, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a descriptive survey design, well-suited for gathering, assessing, and interpreting data within a real-world context without altering existing conditions (Hassan, 2024). This approach allowed for the observation and documentation of key phenomena, exploration of variable relationships, and formulation of generalizable insights. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, the design facilitated a holistic evaluation of the Women Uplift Project's influence within Kangemi Slums.

The study focused on women aged 18 and above who had engaged in the economic empowerment components of the Women Uplift Project. These components included capacity-building workshops, access to microfinance services, and leadership training initiatives. Data collection targeted ten self-help groups and three women's associations actively participating in activities such as table banking, micro-savings and loan programs, vocational skill development, small-scale enterprise, and community support efforts. Group sizes ranged from 15 to 25

members, with an average of 20 participants per group, yielding an approximate sample size of 200 women (Women Empowerment Project Coordinator, personal communication, March 12, 2025).

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who had actively engaged in the Women Uplift Project. This technique ensured that the sample included women with direct experience in empowerment activities, thereby enhancing the relevance and depth of the data. From the identified self-help groups and associations, participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate.

To ensure comprehensive data collection, the study employed two primary instruments. Structured questionnaires, consisting mainly of closed-ended questions, were used to obtain quantitative data on key indicators such as financial access, autonomy in decision-making, and levels of self-efficacy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to gather qualitative insights, offering a deeper understanding of the empowerment journey, the obstacles encountered, and the long-term viability of the interventions (Guest et al., 2020). By integrating these methods, the study achieved methodological triangulation, which strengthened both the credibility and depth of the findings.

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research findings. Quantitative responses from the questionnaires were examined using descriptive statistics—such as frequencies, percentages, and means—and inferential methods where relevant. Qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus group discussions were subjected to thematic analysis, which helped uncover consistent patterns and deeper insights into empowerment and social transformation. To enhance reliability, the questionnaire underwent pre-testing and was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with a benchmark of 0.7 confirming acceptable internal consistency. Content validity was strengthened through expert input and alignment with the study's conceptual framework and objectives (Kumar, 2019).

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The study involved 200 women from Kangemi Slums who had participated in the Women Uplift Project. The respondents varied in age, with the majority falling between 26 and 35 years. Most were married, had attained primary or secondary education, and were engaged in informal employment or self-employment. Their duration of involvement in the project ranged from less than one year to over two years, providing a diverse sample for assessing the impact of economic empowerment and social transformation.

Findings on economic empowerment revealed that a significant number of women had gained improved access to financial resources, including savings and credit facilities, with many actively participating in table banking and microfinance schemes. A majority reported increased confidence in managing personal and business finances. Entrepreneurial support was evident, as many respondents had started or expanded income-generating activities and benefited from mentorship and business training. Vocational and technical training was widely accessed, equipping women with market-relevant skills and enhancing their employability and business capacity.

In terms of social transformation, the results showed that many women experienced greater involvement in household decision-making and felt more confident expressing their views within their families. Civic participation had also increased, with several respondents engaging in community meetings, advocacy campaigns, and local governance forums. Leadership and community engagement were notable, as a portion of the women held roles in self-help groups and contributed to welfare initiatives such as clean-up drives and health awareness programs. The results are presented in Table 1

Table 1: Response on Economic Empowerment

Statements	SD	D	M	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev
I have access to income-generating opportunities through the Women Uplift Project.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	61 (33.5%)	97 (53.3%)	24 (13.2%)	3.79	.663
The financial support provided has improved my household's economic situation.	0 (0.0%)	3 (1.6%)	72 (39.6%)	83 (45.6%)	24 (13.2%)	3.69	.721
I can now save or invest money as a result of the empowerment program.	3 (1.6%)	1 (0.5%)	78 (42.9%)	78 (42.9%)	22 (12.1%)	3.62	.775
I have better access to credit or microfinance compared to before.	2 (1.1%)	1 (0.5%)	65 (35.7%)	86 (47.3%)	28 (15.4%)	3.75	.767
I can independently make financial decisions in my household.	0 (0.0%)	4 (2.2%)	67 (36.8%)	95 (52.2%)	16 (8.8%)	3.67	.670
I feel more confident engaging in business activities.	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.5%)	67 (36.8%)	99 (54.4%)	15 (8.2%)	3.70	.627
The skills and vocational training I received have enabled me to start or improve my own business.	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	45 (24.7%)	104 (57.1%)	32 (17.6%)	3.90	.688
Composite mean & Std. Dev						3.73	0.70.

Findings from the study indicate that economic empowerment through the Women Uplift Project has positively influenced participants' livelihoods and financial autonomy. Out of 182 respondents, majority, 97 (53.3%), agreed that they had gained access to income-generating opportunities, with 24 (13.2%) strongly agreeing and 61 (33.5%) remaining neutral, while none disagreed.

The mean response was $M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.663$, reflecting consistent perceptions across participants. One participant emphasized this shift, noting that raising poultry and selling eggs had created a new source of family income an outcome.

The findings further reveal improvements in household welfare, with 96 (52.7%) of respondents agreeing and 49 (26.9%) strongly agreeing that their household conditions had improved ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.721$). A participant highlighted this change by explaining that it had become easier to provide food for children without relying on borrowing.

Savings and investment also emerged as benefits, with 84 (46.2%) agreeing and 46 (25.3%) strongly agreeing, though some participants indicated that saving consistently remained a challenge ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.775$), echoing Amutabi (2021).

Access to microfinance was reported by 92 (50.5%) agreeing and 51 (28.0%) strongly agreeing ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.767$), though some described the process as intimidating. Financial decision-making autonomy was also enhanced, with 88 (48.4%) agreeing and 57 (31.3%) strongly agreeing ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.670$), while one participant noted being entrusted by a spouse to manage part of household income.

Increased confidence in business engagement was reported ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.627$), particularly in negotiations and client interactions (Amutabi, 2021). Finally, vocational training was highlighted as a major driver of entrepreneurship, with 102 (56.0%) agreeing and 53 (29.1%) strongly agreeing ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.688$), as some respondents attributed the establishment of small businesses, such as soap-making enterprises, to the skills acquired.

DISCUSSION

The study confirmed that economic empowerment plays a pivotal role in driving social transformation among women in Kangemi Slums. The findings revealed that the Women Uplift Project significantly enhanced participants' access to income-generating opportunities, improved household welfare, and increased financial autonomy. A majority of respondents reported gaining access to alternative sources of income, such as poultry farming and small businesses, which reduced reliance on borrowing and strengthened household resilience. This aligns with the work of Kimani et al. (2022), who noted that economic empowerment enables women to improve their living conditions and enhances their bargaining power within households. Similarly, Kabeer (2016) emphasized that access to income-generating activities is a key

determinant of women's capacity to negotiate power dynamics and influence household decision-making.

Moreover, the positive impact of economic empowerment observed in this study reflects global evidence. For instance, Malhotra and Schuler (2018) assert that financial inclusion and income diversification for women in low-income settings lead to greater autonomy, improved health outcomes, and enhanced social participation. In the African context, Onyango and Wanjiku (2021) found that women's access to credit and entrepreneurship opportunities contributes significantly to poverty reduction and resilience against economic shocks. Likewise, a study by the World Bank (2020) observed that women-led microenterprises in informal settlements often become critical sources of household income, reducing vulnerability to food insecurity and increasing access to education for children.

The diversification of livelihoods through initiatives such as poultry farming, tailoring, and soap-making not only increases income but also builds long-term adaptive capacity. This is consistent with findings by Nzomo (2023), who argued that sustainable livelihood programs enhance women's ability to cope with urban poverty and economic volatility. The improvement in household welfare and the ability to provide basic needs such as food without external assistance reflects a shift towards economic stability. These findings are consistent with UN Women (2023), which emphasizes that financial inclusion and income diversification are critical in reducing poverty and promoting gender equality. Furthermore, the respondents' ability to save and invest, despite challenges in consistent saving, mirrors observations by Amutabi (2021), who argued that empowerment programs create opportunities for long-term wealth accumulation, though sustainability requires addressing barriers such as irregular income and financial literacy gaps.

The study further revealed that access to microfinance and enhanced financial decision-making autonomy were significant outcomes of the Women Uplift Project. Many participants reported feeling increasingly trusted to manage household income, a development that reflects a positive shift in gender dynamics and the redistribution of financial responsibilities within families. This finding resonates with Ogwora (2022), who noted that financial autonomy not only builds women's confidence but also promotes inclusive household decision-making. Similarly, Kabeer (2018) emphasizes that control over financial resources empowers women to challenge traditional gender roles and fosters shared power within domestic spheres. However, the study also uncovered challenges in the microfinance process, with some participants describing loan application procedures as intimidating and overly bureaucratic. This suggests the necessity for simplified application processes and financial literacy training, a recommendation supported by Johnson and Arnold (2021), who argue that user-friendly financial systems and capacity-building interventions are critical for enhancing women's confidence in engaging with financial institutions.

Another notable achievement of the program was the enhancement of business confidence and entrepreneurial capacity through comprehensive vocational training. Participants acknowledged

that the acquired skills enabled them to initiate and manage small-scale enterprises such as soap-making, poultry farming, tailoring, and beadwork, which diversified their income sources and improved household stability. This finding supports Dong (2022), who asserts that vocational education plays a critical role in promoting sustainable livelihoods by equipping individuals with market-oriented skills for self-employment. Similarly, Volodzkiene (2025) emphasizes that educational empowerment, particularly through practical skills development, strengthens women's economic independence, enhances employability, and fosters resilience in the face of economic shocks. These results also echo the work of Wanjiku and Mwangi (2021), who observed that entrepreneurial training not only provides technical know-how but also cultivates confidence, risk-taking ability, and business acumen necessary for long-term success. However, despite these gains, some respondents indicated challenges such as limited access to startup capital and market linkages, suggesting that skills training programs should be complemented with financial support mechanisms and mentorship opportunities to maximize impact.

Although the study primarily focused on economic empowerment, the findings indicate that increased confidence and greater control over resources have broader social implications, particularly in shaping women's roles in leadership and community engagement. Several respondents reported feeling more assertive in community forums and decision-making processes, which reflects a transition from passive participation to active involvement in social governance. This observation is consistent with African Development Bank (2021), which asserts that empowerment programs not only improve household welfare but also create a foundation for women's participation in civic and political spaces. Similarly, Kabeer (2018) argues that economic empowerment can act as a catalyst for social transformation by challenging gender norms and enabling women to claim spaces traditionally dominated by men. Despite these positive strides, structural and cultural barriers such as patriarchal attitudes, limited representation in leadership positions, and gendered stereotypes continue to hinder full social inclusion. These findings highlight the need to integrate economic initiatives with advocacy and awareness programs that address systemic gender inequalities to achieve sustainable and holistic empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The study on women empowerment and social transformation in informal settlements, focusing on the Women Uplift Project in Kangemi Slums, Nairobi, Kenya, underscores the critical role of economic empowerment in driving meaningful social change among women in marginalized communities. By enhancing access to income-generating activities, microfinance opportunities, and vocational skills training, the program significantly improved women's financial autonomy, household welfare, and resilience against economic shocks. Beyond economic gains, the intervention fostered confidence, strengthened decision-making capacity, and expanded women's roles in community leadership and social participation. These outcomes demonstrate that empowerment initiatives have a multidimensional impact, influencing not only economic stability but also gender relations and social cohesion.

The findings reveal that systemic barriers such as cultural norms, bureaucratic hurdles in accessing financial services, and persistent gender disparities in leadership continue to hinder the full realization of empowerment goals. Overcoming these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that integrates economic interventions with advocacy, capacity-building, and policy reforms aimed at dismantling structural inequalities. Programs like the Women Uplift Project should go beyond initial support by expanding vocational and entrepreneurial training, strengthening microfinance initiatives, and providing sustained business mentorship to ensure long-term impact. At the policy level, governments should prioritize women's economic empowerment through job creation, enforcement of equal pay laws, and incentives for women-owned enterprises. In addition, future research should investigate innovative models that link women's financial independence to community-wide socio-economic transformation to better understand the long-term outcomes of empowerment interventions. Ultimately, empowering women in informal settlements is not only vital for individual and household well-being but also serves as a catalyst for inclusive development and sustainable social progress.

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