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Type of the Paper: Research Paper.
Type of Review: Peer Reviewed.
Indexed in: worldwide web.
Google Scholar Citation: AIJMEG

How to Cite this Paper:

Africa International Journal of Management Education and Governance (AIJMEG)
A Refereed International Journal of OIRC JOURNALs.
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**ARTICLE INFO**

Received 10th July, 2018
Received in Revised Form 14th September, 2018
Accepted 18th October, 2018
Published online 12th October, 2018

**Keywords:** Women, Gender Equality, Economic Empowerment, Sustainable Development, Capacity Building

**Abstract**

Globally, women’s economic empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development. For the expected women empowerment to be achieved, it will call for empirically informed and appropriate public policies in addition to a holistic intervention to women related issues. This cannot be realized without equally ensuring the right levels of commitment from all the stakeholders and ensuring that gender equality is observed appropriately. The question therefore that we should ask is “How can women groups be effectively integrated in economically empowering their members?” The barriers that these women groups face cannot be underestimated at any given level. The paper specifically attempts to explore appropriate strategies through which the skills development of the group members can be enhanced, particularly starting with the officials who incidentally are the drivers of those groups. The specific objectives of the study were; to determine the role of skills development on women’s economic empowerment and to establish how commitment levels affect women’s economic empowerment among women groups in Kisii County, Kenya. The study was based on a descriptive research design. A simple random sampling technique was adopted to arrive on a sample of 10% from a population of 200 registered and active women groups in Kisii County, Kenya. Out of each group, two members were picked through simple random sampling. The findings revealed that over 90% of the members of these groups have minimal or no book keeping skills at all. In 17 out of 20 groups covered in this paper, there exists a wide skill gap that needs to be urgently bridged towards enhancing women’s economic empowerment. The paper recommended that addressing challenges to women’s economic empowerment is key to inclusivity and sustainability. In addition, appropriate systems be put in place to provide access to basic training in specific skills, especially for rural based women groups. The paper concluded that all stakeholders who have been found to play a crucial role in women’s economic empowerment should propose possible innovative ways through which this can be achieved with ease and convenience.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background information

Globally, women’s economic empowerment has gradually become a prerequisite for sustainable development. Across the world various approaches to economic empowerment, especially on issues affecting women have been incorporated towards enhancing their participation in this noble task so as to succeed economically. However, it cannot be underestimated that some of these approaches are in one way or the other socially and politically instigated. For us to achieve the expected gender equality and women empowerment, it will call for empirically informed and appropriate public policies in addition to a holistic intervention to women related issues. This cannot be realized without equally ensuring the right levels of commitment from all the stakeholders, men and women included.

Additionally, it is commonly understood that for the appropriate realization of the full economic potential of women in our society, they need to be intensively integrated into the national and local economic activities. Of greater importance is the identification and addressing of the possible barriers that are likely to hinder their economic participation. Without which,
their commitment and contributions towards economic growth will be negligible. Indeed women appear to put a greater share of their earning on the welfare of their households. Women are perceived to be economically empowered when they are able to influence key economic decisions within their reach. This therefore, implies that they need to be well equipped with adequate and relevant book-keeping skills geared towards enhancing their participation in income generating activities. The paper addresses the aspect a gender equal Africa by emphasizing on the techniques of empowering women first to a level that they can favourably compete with men in their communities.

1.2 Statement of the problem
The fact that both county and national governments have realized that economic growth can be enhanced by empowering women economically, not much has been achieved. There continues and seemingly unending economic gap observable between men and women. The understanding that women perform at least 66% of the world’s work and yet only earn only 10% of the income therein should be a pointer to the leaders at all levels that all is not well (Clinton Global Initiative, 2009). There appears to be a significant difference in the manner by which men and women run transactions in their groups. Most women groups lag behind and appears to be limited in their operations, both financially and geographically. Therefore women’s economic empowerment cannot be complete without bridging the identified gaps by enabling them to realize success in their businesses both at group and individual levels. In particular, most of the members of these groups seem to be lacking basic book keeping skills. This if not addressed the women affected will be continually incapacitated and therefore not able to drive their economic empowerment effectively. Indeed there is no sustainable development without engaging women participation fully; without which there is nothing like women economic empowerment in any society.

1.3 Research Objectives
The paper is based on two specific objectives, namely:
(i) To determine the role of skills development on women’s economic empowerment among women groups in Kisii County, Kenya.
(ii) To establish how commitment levels influence women’s economic empowerment among women groups in Kisii County, Kenya.

1.4 Research questions
The paper attempted to answer the following research questions:
(i) What is the role of skills development on women’s economic empowerment among women groups in Kisii County Kenya?
(ii) How do commitment levels affect women’s economic empowerment among women groups in Kisii County Kenya?

2.0 Literature Review
2.1 Theoretical framework
The paper is based on the expectancy theory. The members join a group driven by what they anticipate to gain or realize at the end of a given period. This perception necessitates them to subscribe to the group periodically, either weekly or monthly. A member expects a higher yield from her input. According to the United Kingdom Department for International Development (2010), women owned businesses form approximately 38% of the registered small and medium businesses.

2.2 Conceptual framework
The independent and dependent variables were related as shown in figure 2.1.
Skills development as an independent variable is perceived to influence positively the potential of women to transact their businesses as a group. Commitment is observed through the level of access to resources, grants and sponsorship therein, which incidentally influences the economic empowerment realizable on women. On the other hand the dependent variable was observed through increased member potentials to initiate and run additional income generating activities accompanied with dividend maximization from their share contributions.

2.3 Empirical Review
According to the World Bank report (2015), women are responsible for over 80% of consumable expenses and yet they comprise of only one third of the formal businesses. To support this fact the Food and Agriculture Organization reports that if women had equally been supported as men, they could increase their farm outputs by approximately 30%. The World Bank report further reported that an increase in women’s economic opportunities enhances their participation in economic growth and therefore lead to higher gross domestic product of any given country.

Skills development involves the entire productive abilities acquired in most cases through education and training provided at both formal and informal levels.

3.0 Methodology
The study was based on a descriptive research design. A sample of 10% was drawn through simple random sampling from a population of 200 registered and active women groups for the purpose of this study.

4.0 Data Analysis and Results
4.1 Response rate
All the questionnaires administered were returned, giving a response rate of 100%. This was largely attributed to the fact that the researcher collected the data collection tools on the material day as were issued.

4.2 Skills Development
4.2.1 Basic training
At least 80% of the respondents indicated that basic education formed the threshold for women’s empowerment. Indeed it is only through education and training that women would acquire appropriate knowledge and skills that they dearly need in their endeavor towards exploiting the available economic opportunities. On the other hand 70% of the respondents were limited in their access to quality education. Their accessibility was denied as a result of poverty and other household demands. Further analysis revealed that up to 75% would easily and willingly take up a relevant training provided they got a sponsor to take care of their vocational training expenses.
4.2.2 Literacy levels
Data analysis indicated that lack of basic legal knowledge limited members’ capacity to exercise their rights as per the group contributions. Indeed, further analysis revealed that slightly over 25% could not feel comfortable taking a legal step on her group officials in case of infringement of a member’s rights. Additionally, a similar number lacks an understanding of how their dividends accrue at the end of the year. However, it was interesting to note that more than 95% of the respondents do not question their group’s financial reports, so long as they receive a token for their family; which however small, it may create an impact in their households. This should be aimed at realizing higher outputs than what is currently being observed.

4.2.3 Book keeping skills
Out of the 40 respondents, 90% of them agreed that they lacked basic book keeping skills, while only 10% had in one way other the other acquired some basic concepts in this area. This meant that the women groups comprised of mostly members who could not understand the transactions of their group. Interestingly, only one half of the respondents suggested that they could be willing to attend classes to acquire basic book keeping concepts.

4.3 Member Commitment
4.3.1 Access to resources
It was revealed that at least 90% of the respondents had fewer resources within their disposal and a further suggestion that they were limited in their control. In case of any decision regarding the family resources, then only the husband had unquestionable control. An indication that the members’ inadequacy to influence favourable decisions regarding resources within their control translated into a negative impact on their contributions to the group. Further analysis shows that members who had direct access to resources had upto 87.5% chances of fully exploiting their group opportunities and related benefits.

4.3.2 Accessibility to grants, loans and sponsorship
It was revealed that only a dismal 5% of the women groups in the study had access to a grant or sponsorship services in their group projects or activities. Hence the need to purposively integrate women empowerment aspect in the county governments in order to ensure their coverage in policies and other relevant programs. Indeed further analysis indicated that at least 70% of the women groups are activated and remembered for such sponsorships towards an electioneering period, and forgotten slightly after the occasion. Just for a political mirage.

4.0 Conclusion and Recommendations
Based on the study findings discussed above, the paper concludes by pointing out the need to lay more emphasis on viable initiatives and approaches that are meant to enhance the participation of women on economic growth and development. Skills development across the board should equally be advocated for all women group members so as to enhance their potential to exploit the available opportunities for economic empowerment. Equally important, capacity building will add value to this noble endeavour. This will include but not limited to training, skills development and provision of an enabling environment towards enhancing women participation in productive economic activities in addition to making informed decisions. To realize this a formidable training strategy for the elderly is needed to be developed and implemented accordingly. Above all, we should endeavour to harness opportunities knocking at our doors to advance the status of women in our communities.

Appropriate systems need to be put in place in order to closely monitor and ensure women’s access to basic training, especially on book keeping skills, which was significantly pronounced in rural based women groups. The systems should address strategic poverty reduction and by extension women’s economic empowerment approaches. A special emphasis on women participation in economic-related activities is critical at all levels. It is therefore, recommended that key stakeholders, particularly the County Government form advisory groups that are meant to work closely with the registered women groups in managing their resources in addition to steering viable income generating activities.

As part of informed recommendations, the paper points out the need to facilitate accessibility to financial sources that they can manage with ease while ensuring the survival of their groups in a largely competitive environment. While focusing on this aspect, the key stakeholders should equally support women towards growing their business entities by providing accessibility to relevant and available opportunities.
Similarly, key policies and guidelines should be formulated and supported by both levels of government to enable ease access to economic resources and ownership of property which unfortunately has been the preserve of men in the society. Given the minimal levels of members with direct control over family resources, appropriate mechanism should be put in place to support and enhance women’s access to key resources, such as land and dairy animals. Where possible government agencies are expected to develop and provide policies that favourably address of women dominated economic activities, such as tax exemptions on ‘small’ items or properties. More specifically, the county governments are encouraged to devise viable systems that call for their deliberate effort to overcome the household and other cultural demands that hinder women and have been overtaken with time. The paper lastly reinforces that we should endeavor to do what is perceived to be right towards enhancing the participation of women in economic empowerment and sustainable development. By so doing, the lives of many members in our communities will be positively influenced.

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