EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN KENYA, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES: CASE OF MIGWANI SUB-COUNTY, KITUI COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the link between the empowerment of rural women and sustainable development. Women account for about half of the world's population. However, despite decades of development and a push for democracy and good governance globally, women still remain among vulnerable groups in the world living in abject poverty and lacking access and control over resources. For instance, even though women constitute the majority in food production, only 20% of them own arable land globally. Even with the high population, their participation in public leadership, decisions and policymaking largely remains extremely skewed towards men. For that reason, some international agencies have strongly addressed themselves to the plight of women, working towards more gender equity. Thus, the only assured pathway to development sustainability is to ensure consideration of both women's and men's voices and interests as well as having parity in the allocation of resources and opportunities. This paper entails a descriptive study whose data was collected from 100 respondents using a questionnaire. Both women and men were sampled to avoid any biases. The study findings indicated that; women were the majority in the informal sector with 86% compared to men who accounted for only 14%. However, despite their heavy presence in the sector, their educational status was very low with only 78.2% having attained primary school education, whereas the men had higher educational achievement with 76.9% having attained a secondary school education. In spite of the traditional strategies of empowerment adopted by the government and the private sector, the study established that women had their preferred strategies to empower themselves. For example, they valued the availability of saving cooperatives (95.4%); having a safe working environment for their business (95.4%); getting family support in doing business (91.5%); equitable access to relevant and timely information (95.4%); having facilities like table banking (95.4%); having training on decision-making (91.5%) and having access to credit facilities (90.8%). Therefore, the involvement of women in policy and decision-making on issues of their empowerment is critical in order to adopt and implement their voices and interests. Without women's involvement and engagement, the realization of sustainable development cannot be attained.

Keywords: Gender, Participation, Equity, Inclusivity, Social justice, Sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

Theory of empowerment and development

Empowerment of women is critical in order to complement their efforts and contributions to the realisation of sustainable development. Thus, women's empowerment remains an indispensable roadmap in the attainment of sustainable development (Msila, 2013; Gates, 2014; Pratley, 2016). Moreover, according to World Bank (2016), women's empowerment is the basis of their full participation in development and the realisation of their full potential in bringing about sustainable development. As opined by Nason (2019), although women account for nearly half of the world's population, they remain overrepresented in the category of the most vulnerable group the world over. Above and beyond being the majority in the agricultural sector, women continue to lack access to factors of economic production such as land and other related resources. Additionally, they are not incorporated in policy and decision-making processes (Pavanello, Pozarny & De la O Campos, 2015). For that matter, it is only through empowerment that women may be able to elaborate and recreate a favorable social environment for the realization of the full control of their lives, for example, enjoyment ofsocial justice and democratization, having equitability and inclusivity and fair distribution of resources in the society (Gates, 2014).

The theory of empowerment describes diverse ways of measuring the construct of empowerment in different contexts thus making the construct applicable in a multi-disciplinary context. Therefore, whatever the context, empowerment is concernedwithfocusing on the process of empowerment and the desired outcomes or goals to be realized through the process. Historically, the phenomenon and theme of empowerment are not new. They have, however, received renewed interest over the past four decades since the 1980s (Msila, 2013).

Generally, empowerment is about the emancipation of the disadvantaged and vulnerable in order for them to have control over their lives and thus assisting them to regain their rights and voice (Gates, 2014). According to Luma (2019), empowerment enables the vulnerable to attain access to resources; enhanced participation in the process of decision, and in that regard to express their voice and interest on matters that affect their lives. Consequently, empowerment helps persons to be integrated into their communities, enabling them to become part of the process of determining the community's future and its overall social destination.

Comparatively, the World Bank (2016) and Pratley (2016) agree that the empowerment process transforms completely the status and social image of the empowered person. For example, in regard to the empowered women, it radically changes them as they begin to assume new and challenging responsibilities which they could not touch before. For instance, increasingly having:

- Enhanced control over their lives
- The power to challenge constraints (by having a voice, and determination of their interests)
- Increased individual capacity and opportunities for access and control over resources
- Increased solidarity to challenge underlying assumptions
- Increased awareness and desire for positive change
- Newly acquired attitudes and perception towards self, others and social problems

In sub-Saharan Africa, patriarchy remains a predominant family system thatundeniably has compromised women's lives through unparalleled human rights exploitations, sexual discrimination and abuse, rampant intimate violence, political marginalization, and systematic economic deprivation (Nason, 2017). Furthermore, due to a rigid division of labour, women's choices in life are limited. For that reason, their freedom of expression remains very much restricted because their roles and social status are predetermined by culture. Moreover, patriarchy strictly dictates their roles in all sectors like socio-economic, political, religious and domestic. With the overwhelming rigidity scripted by patriarchy and society, it becomes complex for women to improve their status (Gates, 2014; Msila, 2013; World Bank, 2016). Rigidity in the patriarchal system, therefore, results in total discrimination of women in all the critical sectors. For example, in the education sector, men tend to have more access compared to women (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2017). The same factor of discrimination is also responsible for the lop-sided access in regard to critical services like access to health facilities, employment and job opportunities, satisfactory political participation, and finally, even participation in decision-making processes (World Bank, 2016). Even with all the obstacles in place, women still remain indispensable development partners globally. However, for the women to fulfill their full potential in development, their empowerment is fundamental. Tope (2011) makes the same conclusion that without women's empowerment, attainment of sustainable development is not anywhere visible in the near future and may remain a mere mirage.

Definition of Women's Empowerment and its Implications
There is no single definition of the concept of empowerment which is universally accepted amongst scholars; therefore, the search for a consensually accepted definition still abounds. For the purposes of this study, three definitions have been discussed. According to Mechanic (1991), the phenomenon of empowerment is defined as, '…a process where individuals learn to see a closer correspondence between their goals and sense of how to achieve them, and a relationship between their efforts and life outcomes.' According to the above definition, empowerment is understood as an ongoing process which enables the people to have more awareness of the social issues around them; and how to regain the energy to improve their lives. However, according to Nason (2019), the definition has a serious gap; it seemingly limits empowerment to the individuals' level of analysis. That is to say, the definition does not talk about the integration of the individuals to their community. In a real sense, it is the integration into the community which brings about inclusivity, participation, awareness, and evidently the ongoing interaction within the social environment where the empowered persons may add their voice, make choices, and get hold of the available opportunities and resources for their development (Gates, 2014).

According to Tope (2011), empowerment is defined as, "… a process whereby vulnerable people gain the ability and authority to make decisions and implement change in their own lives" (p. 9). Therefore, for Tope (2011) the empowered person is enabled to interact with the social environment, and through that influence development by being part of decision-making and implementation. According to this definition, the empowered person gains the competency and capacity to be part of the change. Thus, empowerment helps people to overcome limitations such as voicelessness, powerlessness and exclusion which are often experienced by vulnerable groups (Nason, 2017; Msila, 2013; Pratley, 2016).

Cornell Empowerment Group describes empowerment as:

> …an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources (1981, p. 11).

The above definition brings out more important aspects of empowerment: for example, the process is purpose-driven (intentional) and value-based (respect and caring) leading to well-defined expected outcomes (group participation, gaining greater access and control). The definition further brings out the possibility of integration of the empowered people in the community. For example, it points out increased interactions of the people in the community. For instance, there is a show of mutual respect and taking care of each other; making critical reflections; group participation that is working together; equal access to and control of resources. Finally, there is the incorporation of the person-environment interactions. In the long run, the empowered person enjoys emancipation; exerts control over resources; enhanced skills; and increased participation in the larger community to developmental goals. Additionally, empowered persons put more effort into important sectors like economic, social, cultural and political. The overall improvement of these sectors ultimately contributes to sustainable development. Whenever the concept of empowerment is applied in the community context, it brings about the possibility of collective action (participation) which leads to improved quality of standards of living within the community (Stevens, 2010).

As a conclusion to this section, Asad's sentiments are worth noting. He makes the following contribution towards the definition of empowerment:

> ...the right of women to have and to decide their choices and women's sense of self-worth; the right to have greater opportunities and to have access to available resources; their right to have control their own lives both inside and outside of the homes and the ability to affect the direction of social change to create a very just social and economic order at both national and international level (2017, p. 9).

The above definition by Asad has been upheld by this study because it is holistic in its conceptualisation of empowerment. For instance, it focuses on improvement of the social, economic and political dimensions. Thus, through improving the social dimension, it enables the women to acquire a new status whereby their rights are respected and upheld.The psychological aspect of empowerment entails changing the women's thinking and attitudes towards themselves, others and above all towards the problems facing them; that enables the women to have new perspectives. Focusing on the political dimension, women's empowerment means that the empowered women have acquired a new standing in the society whereby they can make choices and decisions especially on the very issues which affect their lives directly.In the final analysis, the economic aspects of empowerment demonstrate the enhancement of women's new economic obligation which enables themto enjoy full access and control over resources; and equitably enjoying the relevant opportunities which enhance sustainable development.

As demonstrated in the above paragraph, empowerment is therefore a multidimensional process touching the individual's social, economic and political dimensions. The process is directly linked to sustainable development because the empowered persons duly address themselves to the main pillars of sustainable development: namely, enhancement of economic and social development, environmental protection, improvement of individuals' rights and democracy, inclusivity, fair distribution of resources, social justice, and equity. Undoubtedly, the empowerment of women is notably one of the effective catalysts towards the achievement of sustainable development. In that regard, Warth and Koparanova (2012) have cautioned us that development is not just a number of projects or even their success; it is rather about the role members play especially their initiatives, participation, access and control over resources; and generally their treatment and relationship especially with those at the top. Stevens (2010) warns that the absence of any of the variables mentioned especially by Warth and Koparanova (2012) effectively compromises sustainable development. For example, without women's empowerment, women's poverty will still persist despite an increasing number of development projects and economic growth (World Bank, 2017).

The complexity of the persistence of women's poverty has epic developmental implications and far-reaching consequences to all generations. For example, it may lead to severe environmental degradation due to some of the activities women may engage in like charcoal burning. Indeed, environmental degradation is one of the ingredients of the unsustainable development recipe. Empowered women, on the other hand, are able to pursue entrepreneurial activities and thus improve their economic prospects without harming the environment (Waweru, 2012). The development which enables women to improve their prospects without endangering the environment, and promotion

of a just society is desirable, and tied to sustainability. For instance, one will encounter improved incomes, poverty reduction and increased access to other critical services like health, education and housing (Pratley, 2016). The realisation of sustainable development is helpful in the promotion of gender equality whereby both men and women have equal rights to access, responsibilities and opportunities as individuals (Otieno, 2016; Amadi & Amadi, 2015). Furthermore, the realisation of equity is important especially in sub-Saharan Africa where patriarchy in the past had promoted inequality by directly favoring men while limiting women's opportunities, access and control, aspirations and needs, choices and roles, and finally their freedom (World Bank, 2014).

In summary, women's empowerment essentially is about women having the capacity to decide and make choices in all issues which affect their lives directly, enhancing their sense of self-worth, having equitable access to greater opportunities and control of available resources around the home and beyond in order to create just and strong communities where all people, both men and women, can live equitably and sustainably (Pratley, 2016; Msila, 2014).

Kenyan Government and Women's Empowerment

Governments the world over, and especially among the low developed countries, have considered women's empowerment as one of the topmost development agendas (World Bank, 2017). For example, in Ethiopia, the government has considered policy amendments in order to promote women's empowerment as a way of bringing about a balanced development for all the citizens, men and women in the country (Amadi, 2015). Thus, the government believes that it will take an integrated development to enhance sustainability; that is, the promotion of all-rounded and comprehensive development. In Nigeria, the government has been employing the public service to empower women and by thus promote equity, access and service delivery.Thus, there was a consensus that gender inequality was responsible for women's exclusion from decision-making, access to economic and critical social resources, discrimination especially against women, increased gender-based violence, and inequalities (Amadi, 2015; Pratley, 2016). Therefore, the government vigorously embarked on the empowerment of women with a clear focus on redressing power imbalances; economic inequalities; existing education gaps; and finally, any kind of inequality manifested in diverse public and private sectors in the country.

The Kenyan government has been more direct and practical in ensuring the realization of universal empowerment of women in the country; of course, the achievement has had many odds working against its fulfillment. For example, cases of elite capture, corruption, lack of will and undesirable political forces, lack of capacity and awareness and negative ethnicity. However, there are notable specific strategies the government has undertaken to bring about women's empowerment.

The government of Kenya has so far introduced two main funding opportunities meant for women's empowerment and that of other vulnerable groups (the youth; orphans and people with disabilities).The main goal of financial empowerment programmes is to enhance the access of the vulnerable to finances in order to promote their own businesses and enterprises at the constituency level; and consequently to stimulate economic growth.

i.   The Uwezo Fund

The Uwezo fund was established in 2013 through Legal Notice No.2 of Public Finance Management Act 2014 (Government of Kenya, 2016); the term "uwezo" is a Kiswahili word which when translated literarily means "capability, ability or potential." Based on the literal translation, the Uwezo fund is about the enhancement of the capacity and ability of the vulnerable people in order to boost their economic and entrepreneurial potentialities.

ii.   Women Enterprise Fund

Women Enterprise Fund was established in 2007 (African Development Bank, 2014; Amadi, 2015; Otieno, 2016). The goals for the funding were to: provide accessible and affordable credit opportunities to the women, and to assist them to start or expand any existing businesses for economic growth through wealth creation and employment opportunities.

On paper the two programmes sound very viable, convincing and promising, more so as they were tailored after the Sustainable Development Goals geared towards poverty reduction among women and other vulnerable groups. However, serious gaps have been realized which may disable the programmes from realizing their intended objectives. For example,

i) Among the developing countries it is hardly clear whether new policies are mere political gimmicks or permanent policy interventions. Because of such eventualities, the funding opportunities may not be taken seriously by the intended recipients and thus reducing the number of people seeking to benefit from them.

ii) The process and procedures of accessing the finances are cumbersome and complex. To many potential beneficiaries, the tough requirements become prohibitory.

iii) The Uwezo Fund in particular is tied to the Constituency Development Fund. By doing so, the political leaders are accused of giving funding to the people who are politically correct, either rewarding them for the way they voted; other times they are said to give the funds to their friends and relatives. Therefore, some of the deserving cases may be turned away because of the way they voted.

iv) In rural areas, there exists a huge information gap; in that regard, a majority of the rural women lack access to the relevant information about the existence of the financial opportunities tailored for their needs.

v) Due to a rigid cultural framework, most of the beneficiaries may not be able to pay back the loans. For example, in a patriarchal setting, women do not control financial resources, but men do. However, the men may not consult the women about the loan and its purposes. So, they end up diverting the money to different purposes from the ones women had. In such circumstances, loan repayment may become difficult.

vi) High illiteracy levels among women are another challenge among rural communities. Since the funding includes elaborate paperwork, the illiterate women definitely would find it a challenge in accessing the funds.

vii) Nearly all the beneficiaries showed a lack of creativity and innovation. For example, after accessing the loans, they ended up duplicating their businesses. Putting up the same business enterprises especially in a small area brings unhealthy competition which leads to low returns. In such prevailing circumstances, repayment of the loans becomes a challenge (Government of Kenya, 2017; Nason, 2019; Gates, 2014; World Bank, 2016).

In order to make the financial empowerment programmes more practical and accessible; the policymakers and designers of the programmes need to involve and engage the women in the designing processes of the fund products and implementation. The participation of the women in decision and policy making makes the products relevant because they will be tailored to real and relevant needs. Also, the women will own the programmes and therefore do everything to make sure of their functioning and eventual success. Involving the women in the implementation also is critical because it will bring equity, transparency, accountability, and social justice. The current framework of the programmes is criticized for bureaucracy, corruption, favoritism, and elite capture. While the government had good intentions in initiating the financial empowerment programmes, the policies have proved to be disempowering to the women and other vulnerable groups. For example, where a poor woman is required to produce a car logbook as a surety, such requirements are not only ridiculous but also prohibitory and disempowering (Tripp, 2014; Waweru, 2012; Otieno, 2016).

a) Empowerment of women to access leadership and decision-making

Traditionally, women have not been empowered to access leadership. Women in the vast continent of Africa have tended to assume domestic and traditional roles which end up limiting them to household chores. For example, women have always taken a front role in food production and security, caregiving at all levels in the community, management of fuels and biodiversity, and finally household management (Msila, 2013). However, recently all the stakeholders in development have realized that without women participating in decision-making and by thus influencing the decisions which affect their lives, the realisation of sustainable development may not be possible. For that matter, governments in the low developed countries have therefore embarked on empowering the women to access leadership positions; and to become part of decision-making mechanisms for sustainable development (Kenyan Constitution, 2010; Waweru & Spraakman, 2012; Ongera et al., 2016).

Empowering women to assume positions of leadership is not easy. In sub-Saharan Africa, leadership is synonymous to men; therefore, institutional 'masculinity' was always been taken for granted. In most cases, the elected leaders are predominantly male (Nason, 2019). According to Dieleman, Qian and Ibrahim (2013), women in Africa are awarded minimal roles as far as leadership is concerned. For that matter, leadership or political activities are considered the special reserve of men while relegating domestic affairs to be women's domain. The overall exclusion of women, as Campbell and Lovenduski (2015) notes, from the leadership process is as a result of social

conceptualization of politics and leadership as a male constituency. Such negative embellishment mostly leads to women's exclusion from policy and decision-making procedures, which in the end compromises their empowerment.

In Kenya, the Constitution (2010) names a requirement for all the elected leadership to allow 30% as women's representation. Even though the constitutional declaration demanding a one- third gender rule is ideally good news to all stakeholders, especially to the women, there are serious gaps in implementing the rule (Kameri-Mbote, Mony-Odhiambo, Muriungi & Nyawira, 2016). For example, there is a lack of procedural explanation by the Kenyan Elections Act on how the one-third quota for women may be realised at all levels, national and local. Furthermore, there are no guidelines which would enhance the election of the underrepresented gender at the political party's leadership. The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IBEC), for instance, does not have an enforcement mechanism requiring the one-third rule gender representation. That leaves the parties at their own discretion to comply or not comply with the election laws on gender equity (Kabeer, 2015). Leadership empowerment for women requires women's participation as fundamental to enhance relevance and ownership. Transforming the women is therefore critical in order to overcome their personal limitations. There is a call for support and mentorship of the women, especially those aspiring for leadership positions. Through mentorship, the women can enhance self-awareness, confidence and critical skills like communication, interpersonal relations and emotional intelligence; as much as leaders are born, they are also made and mentorship is one of the strategies of growing them (World Bank, 2014; Ovida, 2017).

b) Women'sempowerment through access to business education and training

Women's education is now one of the topmost development objectives in the world. However, most of the policies, programmes and projects have been formulated without the participation of the women (Ongera et al., 2016). Therefore, their exclusion has led to serious roadblocks in the implementation and eventual realisation of the desired goals (Ovida, 2017; Jenings et al., 2014; Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2017). For instance, some rigid cultural practices like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM); early and forced marriages; poverty and gender disparity have remained disempowering and prohibitory in achieving universal access in education (Mugweni, 2014; Phan, 2016). Therefore, most stakeholders keep on wondering from whose perspectives the weak educational policies were made since the inherent assumptions and desired outcomes have not yielded the women's empowerment which the world had expected (UNESCO, 2017). Even though there have been some notable improvements in women's access to education, it is lamentable that stereotyping in the formal educational systems is still rampant, and responsible for the reinforcement of the traditional gender roles. Thus, it is a matter of fact that for women's empowerment to be realized irrespective of the educational level, women need to be mentored and assisted to understand their unique conditions; to know and understand their basic rights; and to explore their interests and enhance the skills traditionally denied to them based on gender disparity and stereotypes (Steady, 2011; Naomi, 2014).

Nason (2010) argues that women's access to education is much more than promoting literacy; it involves access to quality education which inherently brings holistic transformation to the woman as a person. For example, beyond quantifying the years spent in school, or simply the elimination of illiteracy which is the very basic outcome; access to quality education should be able to:

- Enhance the women's self-esteem and confidence
- Understand their basic and civil rights
- Share and access relevant information
- Raise their awareness and basic freedoms
- Boost their capacity to make decision and negotiation
- Enhance their competency and skills for income generation
- Improve their initiatives in participation in relevant community activities
- Critically prepare their leadership development

Basically, equitable accessing quality education irrespective of the level, the woman is able to be integrated into her community and thus become part of the community development plan and projects; have increased awareness of her social and political rights; have the capacity to partner and network with other women's groups; increase their visibility in community activities; and finally, women will be able to articulate their issues to all stakeholders including the media (Naomi, 2014; World Bank 2014; Amadi, 2015). As a matter of fact, quality education is fundamental to women's empowerment. For example, it can by far eradicate women's powerlessness. Undoubtedly,

women's powerlessness is directly linked to illiteracy, lack of awareness, information and knowledge. Thus a woman who is informed knowledgeable and skilled will have self-esteem and confidence to improve her circumstances (Ongera et al., 2016).

c) Capacity building of the women in the informal sector

In most low developed countries, the majority of the women workers are informally employed (African Development Bank, 2014). Due to pervasive gender inequalities, women's progression in the labor market especially is curtailed. For example, women cannot equitably access their share in regard to employment, remuneration and improving work conditions especially in the formal sector. Therefore, the unfavorable conditions in the formal sector pushed a majority of the women (60%) to the informal sector to work as self-employed and entrepreneurs (Tripp, 2014; Waweru, 2012). Despite being the biggest employer, the informal sector is engulfed by big social and economic problems which range from: poverty and limited choices among the workers; harassment by municipal and county officials; lack of access to information and critical services; corruption; lack of social protection; violence especially those working in the domestic sector; lack of decent incomes; lack of adequate skills. Due to all the aforesaid limitations, women experience in the informal sector, they cannot benefit much in the sector without empowerment (Hansen, 2015; Heaton, 2015). According to the Global Commission of Future Work (2018), empowering women in the informal sector requires a multidimensional approach. For example, there is need to increase women's access to financial services; enhancement of their social protection; help them to improve their incomes; above all there is need to enhance their representation in legislation and policy and policy-making; women must have a strong voice and collective action so that they may negotiate more forcefully. Finally, Nason (2017) recognizes that a legal framework should be women-friendly by reducing legal and policy barriers; such moves help to create a more even playing field for both men and women. Equity is important for women to overcome challenging gender biases especially in accessing resources and services. Sometimes impartation of entrepreneurial skills is seen as synonymous with empowerment. However, entrepreneurial and managerial skills are not an end to themselves; if anything, they mean nothing without access to capital, markets and supported by fair policies. That is why a good environment is critical for the integration of empowerment. For example, improving the workplace and minimizing health risks are fundamental ingredients for empowerment. A good environment where empowerment can take place should provide safety, and allow an individual's integration to the community; the individual must be able to actualize their potential and initiatives in having meaningful participation and engagement in the community activities (World Bank, 2016). Besides enjoying social justice, there should be equitable power-sharing in order to allow sociopolitical processes, and give each person choices, voice and be able to make a critical reflection on the affairs of the community. Therefore, the informal sector presents a huge stake in the process of women's empowerment given the number of women working there (60%); all consideration should be made to make empowerment in the sector a success (Amadi, 2015).

Conclusion of the Literature Review

The problem which ails Kenya is not a lack of policies for checking gender imbalances and inequalities, but rather the lack of political will to implement the relevant policies (Nason, 2019). For example, according to the Analysis of Policy Environment for Women's Economic Empowerment (2017, p. 7), the government's initiatives towards the empowerment of women in Kenya are not new. As early as 2002, respective policy and programmatic initiatives were initiated. These initiatives included:

- The National Policy on Gender and Development (2000)
- Sessional Paper No.2 of 2006 on Gender Equity and Development; Economic Recovery Strategy (2003 – 2007)
- The Medium-Term Expenditure Framework; the Kenya Joint Assistance Strategy, Vision 2030
- The Millennium Development Goals
- Kenyan Government has Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) amongst others
- There is a labor policy guaranteeing equal pay for equal work (Kenya Constitution, 2010)
- Land Policy exists which gives equal spousal registration rights, access and ownership of land (Kenya Constitution, 2020)

Therefore, the Kenyan government on paper has been more direct and practical in ensuring the realization of universal empowerment of women in the country; of course the achievement has had many odds working against its fulfillment. For example, cases of elite capture, corruption, lack of will and undesirable political forces, lack of capacity and awareness and negative ethnicity. However, the general problem with the Kenyan government is the

lack of political will to enact all its policies for the enhancement of gender empowerment for sustainable development (Otieno, 2016).

THE PROBLEM

Despite predominantly playing the role of food production and livestock keeping, women in rural communities still face restraints in realising their full potential in sustainable development. For instance: gender-based discrimination and violence; disproportionate involvement in unpaid work; skewed access to critical services like healthcare, education, and information. Therefore, women's empowerment has not borne the desired expectations; thus rural women remain disproportionately vulnerable especially to social and environmental impacts. This study therefore investigates the strategies of empowering rural women for sustainable development for the purposes of enhancement of: poverty reduction, improving food security, economic growth and mitigation of the harshness of global warming and climate change.

METHODOLOGY

This was a descriptive study which employed a survey design. Collection of data was done using a questionnaire administered to 100 respondents that formed 30% of the target population. Although the study was about women's empowerment, to avoid any bias, both genders were studied - male and female. The target population was therefore 3,000 men and women working in the informal sector in Migwani sub-County, Kitui County, Kenya. Using a systematic sampling technique, the 100 respondents were picked to participate in the study being every 6th case on the sampling frame. The starting point to pick the sample was determined using a simple random selection.

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

In analysing the data, frequencies and percentages were used. After posting the two on tables, calculations were made, and the implications deduced, and the emerging picture presented.

Table 1: Sex of the people working in the informal sector

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Total
Male	13	13	100
Female	87	13	100
Total	**100**	**100**	

The study established that there were more women working in the informal sector (8%) compared to the men who were only (13%).

Table 2. Highest educational level of the people working in the informal sector

Education Level		
	Female	Male
Primary	78.2	23.1
Secondary	21.8	76.9
University	0	0
Total	100	100

According to Table 2, women working in the informal sector had the lowest educational status. For 78.2% of the women, their highest educational level was primary education; and only 21.8% had attained secondary education. The level of education among the men was higher compared to women. For example, 76.9% of the men working in the informal sector had attained secondary school education, and only 23% had primary school education as their highest level of education.

Table: 3 showing preferred empowerment strategy

Empowerment Strategy	Male Frequency	%	Female Frequency	%
Getting family support and permission	0	0	80	91.5
Learning to read and write	0	0	65	74.7
Availability of saving cooperatives	1	0.7	83	95.4
Safe environment for doing business	1	0.7	83	95.4
Having table banking facility	1	0.7	83	95.4
Training on decision-making	0	0	80	91.5
Training and mentorship on business	0	0	68	78.1
Access to important information	2	15.3	83	95.4
Accessing capital from banks	10	76.9	3	3.4
Accessing credit from microfinance	3	23	79	90.8

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

According to this study, the empowerment strategies preferred by the women working in the informal sector werethe availability of saving cooperatives 95.4%; having a safe environment for doing business 95.4%; and having access to information 95.4%. Women were willing to save for the growth of their businesses; however, they preferred to save through cooperatives. By requiring a safe environment for working, women explained that what they wanted was social justice, fairness, equity and good policies which would tackle problems like corruption and violence. The women therefore were clear to the strategies which could empower them according to their needs (Asad, 2017; Hill et al., 2016). Additionally, as mentioned in the literature review (World Bank, 2016; Pratley, 2016; Ongera, 2016; and UNESCO 2017) all shared the same theme of an enhanced safe environment where women could do their business and other developments without fear, corruption, violence or any form of social threats.

In the literature review, for instance, the World Bank (2017) states that the strategies mentioned in most of the literature do not match the views given by women. The obvious conclusion is that in order to be able to come up with relevant strategies for empowering women, women must be involved in determining the strategies and their ranking. Leaving the women out in the process of determining the strategies is a sure way of failing because the strategies forced on the women may not work at all. For example, most governments in the developing countries have rushed to avail themselves of empowerment funds. But according to the findings in this study, women prefer getting credit either from table banking programs (95.4%) or from the microfinances (90.8%). When women were probed why they do not prefer getting credit from banks, they cited complex procedures and paperwork. The rigid requirements for collateral like car logbooks, or title deeds became disempowering and prohibitory for women's access to credit from banks. Thus only 3.4% of the women had accessed credit from the banks. Given that 74.7% of the women had just basic education, it is understandable why women shied away from bulky paperwork, and demand for collateral in the banks. Thus table banking and microfinance were the preferred options by the women. World Bank (2017) and Asad (2017) have the same argument of enhanced equity for women as a pathway to sustainability.

Government based empowerment funds like Uwezo in Kenya were not popular among the women because 78.2% of the women were not aware of it. Furthermore, a lack of awareness is also demonstrated by the finding where 95.4% of the women said they would want to access important information for their empowerment. In most of the African countries, politics come with violence, that fact which could be responsible for the 31.7% of women who feared to access the government-based women's empowerment fund. For that reason the women did not get the money fearing political repercussions since they associated the funds with politics. Women tend to be domestic minded in the low developing countries. In that regard, 91.5% felt it was necessary to get family support for their work in the informal sector. They gave examples like whenever they were required to travel far from their families and thus leaving behind their domestic chores. Access to relevant and correct information is critical for women's development, thus a lack of awareness as argued by both Pratley (2016) and Msila (2013) is one of the obstacles to embracing the available opportunities by women in order to enhance sustainable development.

The study also established that women saw training as fundamental in boosting their empowerment; for example, 91.1% wanted to be trained on decision-making. Probed further to explain why they saw decision-making as critical, they gave the following reason that decisions may mean huge losses. Therefore, 64.1% of the women wanted to be

confident that they were in charge of their work and destiny, and satisfied that they were making good decisions. Some of the women (35.8%) wanted to work independently from their families' interference; therefore being able to make good decisions would therefore give them the independence they were looking for. Finally, 78.1% said that they needed business training in order to become more efficient in their work. Therefore, they saw business training and mentorship as a pathway towards their economic growth and sustainability (Heaton, 2015; Asad, 2017). Putting women in the center of development calls for capacity building and empowerment in order to boost their knowledge, and critical skills fundamental for sustainable development (Gates, 2014; Pavanello et al., 2015; Hansen, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Sustainable development cannot be realised without women's participation because they are critical players in development, especially the two important domains of food production and the informal sector. Furthermore, authentic development is only realisable if there is participation by all stakeholders; thus women's empowerment is critical to enhancing their equitable participation in development. Women's participation in development brings inclusivity, equity, and social justice. By adding their voice and interest in the development process, they are instrumental inreducing poverty and increasing household wellbeing. The study further revealed significantly that there is a positive relationship between women's access to information, education, decision-making, access to credit and availability of a safe environment for doing business. Therefore, there is a link between women's empowerment and poverty reduction. The determination of the relevant strategies in women's empowerment cannot be done without the involvement and participation of women. Women must not only be included, but their voices and interests must be considered for the realization of their full empowerment for sustainable development. Empowerment means giving women control of their lives, changing their perspectives about themselves, other people and social problems. The empowered women are integrated into the community, thus giving them the power to determine the direction of the community development with equity, and equal opportunities with men. Thus, women all over the world must have equal rights, inclusivity, freedoms and equal opportunities for the enhancement of sustainable development. For that to happen, they need empowerment in order to free themselves from all forms of gender-based violence, stereotype, and discrimination. Undoubtedly, women's equity, inclusivity, socialjustice and empowerment are fundamental parts of sustainability; moreover, the values are integral to Sustainable Development Goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) All stakeholders engaged in women's empowerment must enhance women's participation in all the stages in order to determine the best strategy for women's empowerment
2) Women's empowerment is critical for the realization of sustainable development given their bulk involvement in development at the critical sectors such as food production and the informal sector.
3) All efforts should be directed towards diminishing the disempowering and prohibitory factors which undermine women's empowerment.

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