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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

A STUDY ON THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WIDOWS
IN NAIROBI, KENYA

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Global Studies - Master of Science programme - May 2023

ABSTRACT

As international actors and public policies have centered the ambition of gender equity, empowerment has become a buzzword within international development. With its original conceptualization suggesting a process of redefining the structures of power, feminist scholars have noted how empowerment has been robbed of its central element; power. Originally meant to be a political concept enabling marginalized populations to access power, mainstream development actors have depoliticized the notion and reduced its broad conceptualization to its economic dimension. Additionally, the perspectives of women are absent in both research and development policies. By employing a qualitative research design the following study analyzes how widows experience an NGO-initiated economic empowerment project in Kibera, Kenya. Utilizing Kabeer's (1999) theoretical framework, the study seeks to analyze the empowerment processes through Kabeer's three dimensions of empowerment; resources, agency, and achievements. Through semi-structured interviews and discussions, the study found that the participants were able to exercise individual and collective agency over the material, cognitive and relational resources, to reach a variety of meaningful achievements, particularly by challenging the gender norms of women and widows. Yet, the project struggled to contribute to a meaningful, transformative change in the community, outside the realm of the project.

Key Words: *Widowhood, Women's Empowerment; Gender Equality; Kenya; Power Structures.*

Word Count: 19 520

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following paper was only made possible by the support of the many kind and wise people, whom I have the pleasure to be surrounded by. The following section is dedicated to them.

Firstly, I wish to thank the women who gave up their valuable time to participate in this study, and for giving me the privilege of hearing your thoughts, ideas, and stories.

I would also like to thank the NEPHAK and WAY Empowerment personnel who could not have given me a warmer welcome in Kenya. Thank you for allowing me to take part in your project, and for the many fascinating discussions we've had.

I want to thank SIDA and MFS, for providing me with the funds to make this thesis possible.

I am thankful to my fellow students, for providing supportive and guiding insights, and to my supervisor, Jenny Lorentzen, whose wise comments inspired me to keep on writing.

Thanks to Mona and Andrea. I could not have asked for better company during my time in Kenya, and I am entirely grateful for your support throughout the challenging process of conducting both fieldwork and research.

Lastly, I want to express my thankfulness to my friends and family in Sweden, who have supported me throughout my academic and personal journeys. Thanks to my parents for always believing in me, Edwin for the long Facetime calls, and Lisa for being the funniest person I know. I owe my own empowerment journey to all of you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	4
ACRONYMS.....	6
LIST OF FIGURES.....	6
1. Introduction.....	7
1.1 Research Problem and Questions.....	8
1.2 Purpose and Aim.....	9
1.3 Thesis Disposition.....	9
1.4 Background.....	10
1.4.1 The Soap Making and Selling Empowerment Project.....	10
1.4.2 Case Study Site – Kibera, Nairobi County, Kenya.....	12
1.5 Literature Review - Previous Research on Widow’s Empowerment.....	13
2. Theoretical Framework.....	14
2.1 The History of Empowerment and Theoretical Debates.....	14
2.2 Power and Empowerment - Revisiting the Feminist Political Roots of Empowerment... 	15
2.3 Towards an Analytical Framework.....	17
2.4 Kabeer’s Theoretical Framework.....	19
2.4.1 Resources.....	20
2.4.2. Agency.....	21
2.4.3 Achievements.....	23
3. Methodology.....	24
3.1 Research Design.....	24
3.1.1 Semi-Structured Interviews.....	24
3.1.2 Focus Group Discussions.....	25
3.1.3 Respondents and Sampling.....	26
3.2 Thematic Analysis & Operationalization.....	27
3.3 Limitations.....	29
3.4 Ethical Considerations.....	30
3.4.1 Reflexivity & Positionality.....	30
3.4.2 Informed Consent and Confidentiality.....	32
3.4.3 Sensitive Topics and the Risk of Retraumatization.....	33
4. Findings & Analysis.....	34
4.1 Resources.....	35
4.1.1 Material Resources.....	35
4.1.2 Cognitive Resources.....	42
4.1.3 Relational Resources.....	44
4.2 Agency.....	46
4.2.1 Individual Agency.....	46
4.2.2 Collective Agency and Transformative Action.....	50
4.3 Achievements.....	51
5. Conclusion.....	53

5.1 Summary of Findings	53
5.2 Concluding Discussion: Lessons Learned and a Way Forward	54
6. Bibliography	57
7. Appendices	63
Appendix A: List of Interviewees	63
NEPHAK and WAY Empowerment Personnel.....	63
Project Participants.....	63
Appendix B: Interview Guides	64
Project Administrators.....	64
Project Participants.....	64

ACRONYMS

CISU - Civilsamfund i Udvikling

FGD - Focus group discussion

HIV - Human Immunodeficiency Virus

NEPHAK - National Empowerment Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS in Kenya

NGO - Non-governmental Organization

PLHA - People living with HIV/AIDS

SGBV - Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

SGD - Sustainable Development Goals

WAY - Women and Youth Empowerment

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: FGD drawing

Figure 2: FGD drawing

Figure 3: FGD drawing

1. Introduction

Gender equality remains a pressing issue in today's Kenya. Women are overrepresented in statistics of illiteracy and unemployment and lack access to resources, power, and information. Social, cultural, and economic inequalities negatively affect women's ability to acquire basic education, giving them a lower social status and a worse quality of life compared to men (Takayanagi, 2016:673). Women carry out a larger amount of unpaid and domestic work, often leaving them with a double or triple work burden, simultaneously as they depend on their male family members for financial security (Tsukada & Silvia, 2009). These social, cultural, and economic inequalities leave women disadvantaged and disempowered (Takayanagi, 2016:673). As a result, many governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have highlighted women's empowerment as a key stepping stone toward reaching gender equality and other social and economic developmental goals (Chant & Sweetman, 2012: 517; The Loomba Foundation, 2016: 10; Cornwall, 2018:2).

Two examples of such NGOs are this research project's partner organizations WAY Empowerment (WAY) and NEPHAK. With a mission to empower women through economic development projects, they aim at giving women in western Kenya the tools to work their way out of poverty, simultaneously as they strengthen communities and build up the self-confidence of the individual (WAY Empowerment, 2022). This study will focus on one of these economic empowerment projects for widows, which helps women gain financial independence through soap making and selling in Kibera, Nairobi County, Kenya.

Widows are a particularly vulnerable demographic in Kenya, as previous research showcases that women have little claim to status and possessions except in their relation to men, leaving many widowed women excluded, marginalized and subjected to degrading treatment by their communities (Smith 2003: 84; Black 2005: 233; The Loomba Foundation, 2016: 91; Cattell, 2003:50). In addition, there is little legal protection which ensures the widow's right to inherit her husband, leading to in-laws demanding control over the husband's property (Ude & Njoku, 2017: 1514). Due to deteriorating financial circumstances many widows and their children are often forced into sex work, begging and child labor as a means of survival (Smith 2003: 84; Black 2005: 233; The Loomba Foundation, 2016: 91). In other words, widowed women are a crucial demographic to address in order to reach both the Vision 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (The Loomba Foundation, 2016: 9). The vulnerable situation of many widows do also put them at a higher risk of acquiring Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), further jeopardizing their already tough situation as

medication and health care can be inaccessible and expensive (Moremen, 2003: 398-399; The Loomba Foundation, 2016: 98-99).

While there has been increased international attention towards widows within development studies over the last few years, there is still a lack of research which uplifts the perspectives and experiences of women on the ground (Ude & Njoku, 2017: 1512; Cattell, 2003:50, The Loomba Foundation, 2016: 10). In addition, the heavy focus on youth and girls within empowerment studies have excluded the ever-growing population of older women, thus presenting a critical issue; is the empowerment of women of less relevance once they have moved into adulthood? (Chant & Sweetman, 2012: 524). Previous research has shown that empowerment is not easily achieved, thus more research which seeks to emphasize the voices of women who experience empowerment projects can provide crucial insights into empowerment processes, which can inform future development efforts and research (The Loomba Foundation, 2016: 9). Thus, by focusing on both older and widowed women, this study provides a much-needed, unique addition of empirical material and analysis to the current research field.

1.1 Research Problem and Questions

This study seeks to analyze three topics based on the experiences of the project participants. First, it looks into which resources the project provides, and the relationship between these resources. Secondly, I wish to look into how the widows perceive the project to influence their ability to exercise agency in their daily lives. Lastly, I investigate the larger impact of the project by looking at how the project contributes to the achievements of the participants.

1. *What resources does the economic empowerment project provide, and how do the participants perceive these to affect their empowerment?*
2. *How do the participants experience the project to influence their individual and collective agency?*
3. *How does the project contribute to the achievements of empowerment, outlined by the participants?*

1.2 Purpose and Aim

Widows have been neglected in both society and academia, making their voices absent in much of the development discourse. The study takes inspiration from feminist methodology, which states that research should have the ambition to uplift and accentuate the voices of marginalized communities (Tickner, 2005:1, Sjoberg & Via, 2010: 9). Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the continued efforts of highlighting the perspective of widows and the important insights which these perspectives can bring to empowerment and development research.

The study was carried out with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in mind. While the study can contribute to several of the SDGs, I have decided to specifically focus on the first goal; end poverty in all its forms everywhere, and the fifth goal; achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (UNDP & Sida, 2022). Both of these SDGs have little chance of success if the millions of widows and their children are not addressed. Many widowed women are left in poverty, excluded, marginalized, and subjected to oppression by their communities. Children of widows often miss out on education and are forced to support their families through begging, sex work, and child labor. Thus, the circumstances of widows are not only an issue of moral character, as they breach fundamental human rights, but also one of economic and societal nature, as the deprivation set in motion can last generations, jeopardizing social stability and perpetuating poverty. In other words, widowed women are a crucial demographic for both the first and fifth SDGs (The Loomba Foundation, 2016: 9).

Albeit in a modest way, by gathering information and insights into empowerment processes as defined by women on the ground themselves, this study can contribute to the empowerment of women in Kenya, by providing an understanding of the mechanisms behind local empowerment programs, which could inform future empowerment efforts.

1.3 Thesis Disposition

Following this introduction the study will begin by providing a brief background to the two host organizations, the soap project, as well as the case study site of Kibera. This is followed by a literature review that discusses the current research field of widow's empowerment. The theoretical framework begins by providing a brief history of the concept of empowerment, to later review some of the current debates within the field. Based on

Kabeer's empowerment theory, the analytical framework of the study is then introduced. Next, the paper moves on to discuss the methodological approach of the study, beginning with the research design to then discuss the limitations and ethical considerations of the study. This is then followed by the findings and analysis, which are presented in the same chapter, divided into three subsections, which accordingly analyze the resources, agency, and achievements of the empowerment project. Lastly, a summary of findings is presented to be followed by a concluding discussion that defines the study's place in the current literature and informs future research.

1.4 Background

1.4.1 The Soap Making and Selling Empowerment Project

WAY is a Danish non-profit organization, with a mission to empower women and youth through economic development projects. Working in close partnership with charity organizations in Nairobi, these aim at giving women and youth in marginalized communities in western Kenya the tools to work their way out of poverty, simultaneously as they strengthen communities and build up the self-confidence of the individual. With assistance from the Danish Civilsamfund i Udvikling (CISU), the organization funds sports tournaments, self-help groups, farming entrepreneurship programs, and health education (WAY Empowerment, 2022).

Founded in the 1990s, the National Empowerment Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS in Kenya (NEPHAK), is a network NGO which aims to empower PLHA. By uniting existing groups and NGOs engaged in HIV-related work, NEPHAK seeks to empower PLHA through support groups, post-test clubs, community-based organizations, and fieldwork. In addition, the organization attempts to spread awareness of HIV prevention by educating community ambassadors on sexual health, proper medication, and other preventative measures (NEPHAK, n.d.; NEPHAK, 2021).

Sharing the common goal of empowerment, WAY and NEPHAK initiated the soap making and selling project in 2020. With funding from the CISU, the project initially targeted 15 widows and has now grown to encompass a total of 40 women. All of the participants live in Kibera, with an average of five members per family. Low education levels are prevalent, and a majority of the widows live in extreme poverty, below 135 KES (10 SEK) per day.

The decision to focus on soap making and selling was made through a collective decision-making process, where the widows were consulted in brainstorming sessions on business ideas. Due to the quick and easy process of soap-making, and its cheap ingredients, it was decided that it was the most suitable option of production. The participants were then organized into three self-help groups, which take turns in making the soap. The soap is later distributed each week to all participants during a weekly Saturday meeting where they are given five liters each. The participants are expected to sell the soap during the week for 50 KES (3.8 SEK) per liter, to later return to the next Saturday meeting with 250 KES (19 SEK) each. The soap is sold to the local community through door-to-door sales, at schools, hospitals, bus stops, and shops, and through the participants' personal businesses.

The profits are put into a collective savings account, also known as *Jama*, which has three main functions. Firstly, it is used to cover business costs and buying materials. Secondly, the savings function as a micro-loan system, to which the widows can turn if they need a loan. The loans should be returned with a 10% interest rate the next month, however, some flexibility is applied if the widow struggles to repay the loan. Lastly, the leftover profits are shared among the widows at the end of the year and are distributed in proportion to the selling records where those who managed to sell more products receive a larger share of the profits (WAY Empowerment, 2020).

The shares from the last distribution varied greatly depending on the person's sales records, with sums ranging from 1000 KES (75 SEK) to 20 000 (1494 SEK). The large differences were mainly a result of some participants joining the project later during the year, resulting in them making fewer sales, and three of the members having leadership positions and larger responsibilities, allowing them to receive additional compensation for this work (WAY Empowerment, 2020). As of now, the participants are not able to sustain themselves solely from the income from the project, leading a majority of the group members to pursue soap selling as a side business, while having their own sources of income outside of the project. The occupations of the participants varied, with most being engaged in different forms of petty trade.

The project's main ambition is to economically empower the participants and ease their financial situation so that they can meet their basic needs. Yet, the project has ambitions of social and cognitive empowerment as the business functions as an opportunity for widows to build a social network. Further, in addition to training women in soap-making skills, the project initially provided classes in business. The participants also gain practical experiences from business through soap making and selling. By providing experiences of leadership and

entrepreneurship, the project aims to increase the negotiating power and agency of the widows, allowing them to transform from passive beneficiaries to agents of change (WAY Empowerment, 2020).

While the organizations of WAY and NEPHAK assist in the funding of the start-up, quality control, and access to markets, the project is now mainly administered by the group members themselves. While four of the members hold leadership positions, with one being a chairwoman, and the others being leaders of the three subgroups, the project has a flat structure with decisions being made collectively. This structure aims to improve sustainability and transparency, enabling the growth and eventual self-sustainability of the project. In addition, the flat structure of the project allows for an accountability mechanism, where the close ties between the widows are beneficial when dealing with conflict situations.

1.4.2 Case Study Site – Kibera, Nairobi County, Kenya

This project targets the informal settlements of Kibera, which is located 6.6 kilometers from the city center of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, and stands on an area of 2.5 square kilometers. While often referred to as one of the largest informal settlements in Africa, Kibera's true number of inhabitants is highly disputed with estimates ranging from 170, 000 to 700, 000, and even as high as 1.5 million, depending on which slums are included (Termeer, Soma & Motovska, 2022: 2).

Kibera emerged under British colonial rule during the late 19th century but has since grown with certain areas gaining electricity, clean water, proper sewage and even attracting tourism (Yagi & Frenzel, 2020). Yet, despite these efforts the population in Kibera remains poor, with many living in extreme poverty. Many residents lack access to basic services including running water, healthcare, proper housing, solid waste management, infrastructure, security, and energy. Illiteracy rates are high, and many school-aged children are forced to drop out due to the lack of educational centers and the inability to afford school fees (WAY Empowerment, 2020). The area is heavily polluted by garbage, dust, soot, human refuse and other waste, which is worsened by the lack of proper sewage and drainage systems. Unemployment, crime, drug use, and sex work is highly prevalent, often resulting in high rates of HIV, teenage pregnancy, violence and decreased life expectancy. The combination of a lack of sanitation, pollution, and poor nutrition among residents, contributed to the many accounts of illness and disease in Kibera (WAY Empowerment, 2020).

1.5 Literature Review - Previous Research on Widow's Empowerment.

Despite widowhood being considered a risk factor which can transition women and their families into disempowerment, widowhood is seldom addressed in development research and projects, having only recently gained attention within mainstream development literature (Ude & Njoku, 2017: 1512; The Loomba Foundation, 2016).

The living conditions which many widows face due to social norms or economic necessity, presents a large challenge to development work. The Loomba Foundation noted in their 2016 report that the treatment and discrimination of widows amounts to severe human rights violations, as many widows experience harassment, segregation, extortion, starvation, homicide, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) (The Loomba Foundation, 2016). Due to discriminatory legal frameworks favoring of male inheritance, widows often fall victims to the theft of property, land, and even mundane items such as clothing, cooking equipment and bedding, leaving many widows forcibly evicted from their homes and belongings (Peterman, 2012; Ude & Njoku, 2017: 1512). Aside from the loss of property, the loss of a husband often entail sthe loss of the family's main income, pushing many widows into poverty (Ude & Njoku, 2017: 1516). Sevak et. al. conducted a study in the United States, where they noted that around 37 percent of women transitioned into poverty following the death of their spouse (Sevak et al., 2003).

Several studies have found that cultural traditions and stigma can cause the social exclusion of widows and their families, subjecting them to degrading treatment and marginalization (Ude & Njoku, 2017:1517). Due to the lack of social acceptance of single women, remarriage and wife inheritance rituals are common practice in many cultures. Being subjected to stigmatization, isolation and maltreatment, many widows experience increased mental and physical health issues (Campbell et al., 2001; Coleman et al., 2006; Lowe and McClement, 2010).

As the plight of widows has gained mainstream attention, several scholars have addressed the importance of the empowerment of widows and female-headed households. Chant (2007) and Todaro and Smith (2009) noted that the economic empowerment of women carries clear positive impacts for the individual, family and society, as increased income for mothers has a direct effect on children's health and education (Chant 2007: 335; Todaro and Smith 2009: 22). Similarly, Ambasa-Shisanya (2007) called for the importance of

empowerment of women and widows when researching the implications of sexual cleansing rites in the Luo community in Kenya.

While many studies simply state the importance of the empowerment of widows, few go into practical detail of how this can and should be achieved. By conducting a qualitative study which emphasizes women's experiences of NGO-led empowerment projects and situating them in the wider feminist empowerment theory, this study wishes to contribute to an increased understanding of empowerment processes. These valuable insights can later be used to inform future development efforts and their abilities to better accommodate the needs and wishes of women on the ground.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The History of Empowerment and Theoretical Debates

The term empowerment was adopted by women's rights activists in the 1970s, in their struggle for gender equality. These feminist movements advocated for radical change within social, political, and economic structures, to transform discriminatory gender relations and norms (Mosedale 2005: 247).

As feminist movements arose, actors of development began acknowledging that their interventions had differentiated impacts on women and men, leading scholars and actors to call for the need to include women in development plans (Ochman & Ortega-Díaz, 2020: 2). In the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, women's empowerment became a buzzword within international development projects. While rooted in Western notions of development, international strategies began centering the concept of women's empowerment, and replaced the old notions of women as passive receivers of international aid, with the idea of women as actors of change (Ochman & Ortega-Díaz, 2020: 2; Rai et al. 2007: 10).

The original conceptualization of empowerment suggests a process of redefining the structures of power, thus enabling previously vulnerable populations to access and exert power (Ochman & Ortega-Díaz, 2020: 2). However, the 1980s also saw the birth of Neoliberalism. The individualist shift in economic politics made invisible the importance of collective action and social movements and transferred the responsibility for development efforts onto civil society, rather than the state (ibid). This meant an increased focus on

economic rationality and market logic, encouraging individuals to embrace an entrepreneurial spirit (ibid).

Feminist actors have criticized the neoliberal dominance within empowerment efforts on two major accounts. First, an overwhelming part of neoliberal development has focused on economic approaches to empowerment, such as by increasing women's participation in paid labor, believing that an increase in independent incomes will result in an improvement of women's self-esteem and positions in society (see e.g. WTO, 2022; IMF, 2022; European Commission, 2020; UN Women, 2021). This has reduced the previously broad conceptualization of empowerment, including social, psychological, and political dimensions, to solely its economic sphere (Ochman & Ortega-Díaz, 2020:2). Cornwall (2018) has coined the term 'Empowerment Lite' to refer to these versions of empowerment, which reduces empowerment efforts to minor interventions inspired by consumerist and individualist notions, such as increasing women's presence on the market.

Secondly, critical feminist actors have noted how the mainstream adaptation of the term empowerment has neutralized its previous political edge, in favor of neoliberal notions of self-help which perpetuate consumerist and individualist ideals (Cornwall, 2018; Batliwala, 2007:89). In contrast to its original feminist political theory behind empowerment, neoliberal approaches to empowerment do not question nor challenge the hegemony of the world economy but rather reaffirms it by adopting androcentric ideals of independence, efficiency, and profit (Batliwala, 2007:89; Federici, 2004:11; Fraser, 2013:3). As Sardenberg (2008) puts it, the exaggerated focus on the individual in liberal approaches to empowerment, seeks to train women to suit the global market economy without challenging the social and power structures which produce inequities in the first place. This has led to empowerment projects aiming to provide women with small-scale business opportunities, rather than encouraging collective action (Sardenberg, 2008).

2.2 Power and Empowerment - Revisiting the Feminist Political Roots of Empowerment

To achieve a useful theoretical framework, one must revisit the feminist political roots of the concept, and replace its most essential component – power – back into the center of the analysis (Cornwall 2003; Batliwala 2007; Kabeer 1999). Resting on different conceptualizations of power, feminist scholars provide slightly different definitions of

empowerment. However, central to these conceptualizations, is the idea of empowerment as a *process of change*, rather than a zero-sum game of power, where unequal power relations on all levels of society are challenged (Kabeer, 1999: 435; Batliwala, 1994:130; Cornwall, 2016: 344). This includes the public arenas of society, such as politics, the market, and the job sector, but also in the private spheres such as the household, recalling the classical feminist idea of the personal and political (Cornwall, 2016: 344). Empowerment, therefore, has a strong connection to disempowerment and powerlessness, as those who previously had limited agency, control and power in their lives, gain this ability through a process of change which challenges previous arrangements of the distribution of power (Kabeer, 1999: 437). This further entails that empowerment can not be summarized into an easily measurable outcome or end goal (Cornwall, 2016: 344).

Further, most feminist scholars agree that empowerment is not something that can be bestowed upon others, since each woman experiences empowerment in her way, shaped by her experiences, history, and context. However, Rowlands (1997) speaks of a ‘power within’ as an essential part of empowerment, which is expressed through an individual's confidence, self-respect and acceptance, and highlights how outside initiatives can help expand the individuals ‘power within’ by expanding their understanding, imagination, and thinking. Similarly, Cornwall (2016) states that development programs, strategies, and policies can help facilitate this process, by engaging women in critical reflections on their surroundings. Also referred to as ‘consciousness raising’ or ‘critical consciousness’, this can facilitate transformative effects of empowerment projects as it allows the individuals to critically reflect on their circumstances and possibilities. Mosedale (2005) notes that organizations’ ability to help women engage in critical consciousness can have particularly empowering effects in cases where women participate in their oppression. This can occur when gender norms are so embedded in society that they become internalized, making it difficult to imagine an alternative order to that of the status quo. Feminist scholars typically refer to these unchallenged ‘truths’ through Bourdieu’s (1977) idea of doxa, where men and women will conform to the gendered norms and roles ascribed to them, allowing them to become cemented through everyday interactions and societal institutions. Thus, empowerment initiatives can support women to question power structures and participate in the restructuring of power dynamics (Kabeer, 1999).

While development organizations might be able to facilitate the process of empowerment, post-colonial feminist scholars have warned against enforcing Western notions of empowerment and gender equality onto the Global South (Mohanty, 1984). Moreover,

scholars have pointed out the issue of universalizing marginalized women, by assuming their oppression, characteristics, and values (Mosedale, 2005: 245). As such, Kabeer (1999) uplifts the importance of being mindful of the cultural context when implementing or researching empowerment initiatives. Researchers should also consider that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to empowerment and that individuals may choose different paths of empowerment (Ochman & Ortega-Díaz, 2020:4).

Revisiting the original feminist ideas of power within empowerment also means revisiting the central role of collective action. Batliwala (2007: 563) states that the turn towards individualist empowerment logic has hindered women's ability to create social change, as individuals themselves cannot adequately address the structure of gendered inequalities. Such a change calls for collective mobilization. Rowlands (1997) coined the concept of 'power with' to emphasize the relational component of empowerment, where women organize themselves into collectives under common goals and initiatives. Not only can women's organizing provide an arena where individuals can break their isolation and build relationships, but it can also facilitate collective action, where groups can question and challenge systems of oppression (Cornwall, 2016).

2.3 Towards an Analytical Framework

Considering this history of the concept, one may ask why empowerment should be used as a theoretical framework in the first place. The appropriation of the term empowerment within neoliberal development projects has given rise to a broad field of feminist literature, where the concept of empowerment has been thoroughly deconstructed and reconstructed, which despite its history has provided a useful theoretical framework that allows for an understanding of gendered inequalities and within political, economic and social structures (Ochman & Ortega-Díaz, 2020:4).

However, a clear conceptualization must be given for this thesis' use of the term empowerment. Generally speaking, two main approaches can be taken in the attempt to conceptualize empowerment. Firstly, the study can choose to evaluate the change in women's lives based on the priorities and perspectives of the women themselves, allowing them to define what amounts to a positive change in their lives. This approach is tempting as it centers women's voices and prevents issues of research speaking 'for' and 'about' women (Sen, 1990; Kabeer, 2017:650).

The second approach would define and evaluate empowerment based on externally determined criteria, derived from a theoretical understanding of power relations. As this approach privileges outsider perspectives over the lived experiences of women, it can be considered controversial and in some instances risk being Western-centric (Kabeer, 2017: 650). Yet, Jackson (2012) highlights the issue of taking direct testimonies at face value, as power structures affect the individual's ability to challenge the status quo.

For this reason, I have decided to employ the conceptualization of empowerment put forth by Naila Kabeer (1999), as a foundation for this study's analytical framework, which combines the strengths of both approaches. Kabeer's work on women's empowerment presents an alternative to the mainstream neoliberal framework, as it provides a broad understanding of empowerment. While resting on the common sociological definition of power, which sees power as the ability to exercise choice (Dahl, 1957), she defines empowerment as a process of change that is strongly linked to the concept of powerlessness, where "those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 1999: 435).

Kabeer's theoretical framework is relevant to this study for several additional reasons. Developed during her research in Bangladesh during the early 2000s, the circumstances which gave rise to the framework carry many similarities with Kenya. Firstly, Kabeer investigated the empowerment of women targeted by NGO projects, analyzing how these can contribute to the empowerment of women. Kabeer's theoretical framework has successfully been applied in African contexts before, where similar dynamics between NGOs and women have been analyzed. For example, Friedson- Ridenour et al.'s (2019) study in Ghana, utilizes Kabeer's framework to investigate USAID's Feed the Future program's initiative for empowerment.

Secondly, the countries share similar power and gender structures, as both societies are patriarchal with men assuming the role as the head of household. Both societies express a preference towards male heirs, with laws and social norms favoring male inheritance at the cost of the widow's right to property (Cain 1988: 20, Owen 1996: 51; Moors 1996: 80). Additionally, social stigma and norms have led to a widespread issue of degrading treatment of unmarried, separated and widowed women (Sancho-Liao, 1993: 31-32). As a result, widows of both countries are considered particularly vulnerable populations in both the social and economic dimensions (Cain 1988: 20, Owen 1996: 51). Lastly, both the Kenyan and Bangladeshi societies are characterized by a culture of collectivity, meaning that individuals draw their identity from social bonds, family relations, and community associations, instead of basing it on their individual attributes (Baker & Campbell 2013).

2.4 Kabeer's Theoretical Framework

Kabeer defines empowerment as “the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability” (1999: 437). To be disempowered, therefore, is to not have the ability to make strategic life choices. Centering the analysis around women's ability to exercise choice, allows the researcher to discover how empowerment can affect the individual's consciousness and interpersonal relations, and how this allows them to fundamentally challenge social injustices as active citizens. Equally, the framework allows the study to capture how the freedom of choice can impact the distribution of resources and power for individual women as well as in the wider society, further challenging gendered structures and hierarchies (Kabeer, 2017:651).

Kabeer uplifts the importance of considering the conditions of choice. Firstly, choice must imply the possibility of alternatives, meaning that the possibility of choosing otherwise must have at the very least been imaginable for choice to be meaningful. If we cannot imagine acting or thinking outside of imposed social norms, or if we face a high, punitive cost for exerting socially unaccepted choices, we will more likely align our behavior and views with the prescribed social norms. If this is the case, we can no longer speak of a freedom of choice (Kabeer, 1999:435-437).

Secondly, the consequences of choice are an important qualification, since all choices are not of equal value. There is a necessity to distinguish between the many trivial choices made during the everyday life of an individual and the important, strategic choices which define the kinds of lives that one can lead and thus allows the individual to exert a greater degree of control over their life (Kabeer, 1999:437).

Lastly, one should consider the consequences of choice for the society and structure at large. Women's choices are not isolated from the rest of society, but have implications for their position of power in society, as well as for the reproduction and perpetuation of social structures (Kabeer, 1999:437). Kabeer uplifts how women can exercise choices that appear strategic and meaningful but fail to challenge the power structures which left them subordinate in the first place simultaneously as it infringes on the rights and lives of others (Kabeer, 1999:437).

Kabeer highlights three interrelated dimensions of choice; resources, agency, and achievements. She argues that these dimensions are fundamental to the individual's ability to exercise choice, and inseparable, in the sense that the validity and meaning of an indicator will depend on that of the others. (Kabeer, 1999). The following sections will present and

discuss these concepts, and later provide an analytical framework upon which the analysis and conclusion of this study are based.

2.4.1 Resources

Resources are the fundamental building blocks of empowerment. Often unequally distributed in societies and institutions, the access to and ability to utilize resources defines the possibilities of the individual to challenge existing power structures. Kabeer distinguishes between material, cognitive, and relational resources of empowerment. Material resources refer to the access to concrete and fiscal possessions, such as money, land, livestock, and place of residence, but can also include claims to material resources (Kabeer, 1999: 444).

Within empowerment efforts, there is both a pragmatic as well as political aspect to increasing access to material resources. The pragmatic rationale focuses on how material resources can have a direct impact on the living standards of people in poverty, by contributing to fulfilling basic needs. The political view highlights the belief that if people in poverty are less dependent on the goodwill of wealthy others, they will be able to challenge unequal social structures and organize for change (Kabeer, 2011:509).

Cognitive resources refer to the increased awareness and reflections of one's status and opportunities in life, that are gained through the engagement and interactions with others, thus mirroring the concept of critical consciousness outlined earlier by Cornwall (2016: 346). Cognitive resources allow individuals to critically regard their surroundings, leading them to question doxa and challenge power dynamics. This can assist in the process of ending the 'culture of silence' which is often prevalent among people in poverty, as lower rates of literacy and lack of education and knowledge, make it difficult for people in poverty to challenge societal injustices. Development projects should therefore aim to increase the awareness of societal norms and rules which contribute to disempowerment, and educate people on their rights, which in turn can enable them to organize and speak up against social injustice (Kabeer 2011: 511-512). Moreover, cognitive resources can also refer to intellectual resources, such as acquired skills and knowledge, which can equip individuals with the necessary skillfulness to become more self-reliant and possibly lead to employment (Cornwall, 2016: 347).

Relational resources refer to the interactions and relationships between individuals through different forums, in which disempowered individuals can find a source of strength and community in the struggle for equality and justice. In her research, Kabeer found that the

relational aspects of empowerment projects had an important impact on the lives of the participants, as it provided them with a social network to rely on during tough times (Kabeer, 2011: 512).

The distinction between the three types of resources outlined in Kabeer's work does not entail that there is no relationship between them. Much empowerment literature shows a high level of interconnectedness between the different resources of empowerment. Thus, when resources are utilized through agency, they can have a wide impact on the life of the individual, and at times allow the individual to access new forms of resources. For example, studies have shown that widows with a greater knowledge of inheritance law were more capable of advocating for their rights, allowing them to keep a larger share of the deceased spouse's property (The Loomba Foundation, 2016), therefore showing a clear connection between cognitive and material resources. In addition, widows with access to a higher degree of material resources were less likely to be subject to practices of wife inheritance and/or cleansing rituals, since the resources made them less dependent on their relatives and allowed them to advocate for themselves (ibid.). Further, widows and children in extreme poverty are more likely to turn to sex work, begging, and child labor, contributing to the perpetuation of poverty (ibid.).

2.4.2. Agency

Kabeer argues that increased access to resources serves as a potential, rather than an actualized form of empowerment. True empowerment, she argues, is dependent on the individual's ability to exercise agency over the resources available to them. Resources are therefore a 'pre-condition' for empowerment since they only become meaningful when they function as a means through which agency is enacted (Kabeer 2005: 15).

Kabeer defines agency as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (Kabeer, 1999: 438). Yet, agency encompasses much more than simply observable action. Similarly to Rowlands' (1997) 'power within', it refers to people's ability to define goals, and advocate for their access to and control over resources as a means to achieve those goals. Agency can include "decision making, bargaining, negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis" (Kabeer, 1999: 438). Further, it refers to the possibility of decision-making, as individuals and groups can exercise power and control over how resources are utilized (ibid.).

Agency is further complicated by the issue of doxa, as the internalization and conformation to gender norms and social structures can cause individuals to participate in their own oppression (Mosedale, 2005). This is particularly evident in societies dictated by strict gender structures, where women may choose to consent to the existing situation, either as a result of ingrained gender norms or due to the high social costs of breaking norms (1999: 440). While this still reflects an ability of choice, Kabeer refers to them as passive agents, due to the little to no control over their choices and actions (2005: 15). Thus, for women to be able to exercise true agency, empowerment initiatives should center critical consciousness as a practice, to stimulate the ability for individuals to question their surroundings, and imagine alternative ways of living (Cornwall, 2016: 348).

Women may also uphold existing gender norms through efficient or adaptive agency, where their choices and use of resources help streamline typical gender responsibilities (Kabeer 2005: 16). Doing so may increase the efficiency of which gender roles are carried out, thus relieving women of some of their double and triple work burden, yet this form of agency is confined to a limited amount of choices, as their choices do not challenge or go beyond gendered roles and expectations (Kabeer, 1999:440).

Transformative agency requires the negotiation of resources in a sense that disputes existing gender structures which hinders women's decision-making and utilization of resources. Transformative agency could include negotiations of responsibilities, making men take on a larger part of tasks that are typically done by women, and reducing their work burden. This form of agency is the most radical as both men and women must partake in the redefining of gender norms, thus intentionally changing the gendered structures in the community and society. This reallocates resources and the power over them (Kabeer, 1999).

Transformative agency is difficult for the individual to achieve on their own. It is thus necessary to differentiate between individual and collective agency. Individual agency refers to the agency that the individual can exert in reference to their own, personal lives. The individual might be able to negotiate or work for greater equality here, but its wider effect is limited (Kabeer, 2005: 16). Collective agency, on the other hand, can create institutional and systemic change through the organization of women, as collective action can make demands to produce greater equity, increasing the chances of agency leading to an improved situation for other women (Ochman & Ortega-Díaz, 2020:3; Cornwall, 2016: 352).

2.4.3 Achievements

Achievements refer to the outcomes of exercised agency over resources. While difficult to both operationalize and measure, Sen's (1985) concept of capabilities; the opportunity of achieving one's desired ways of 'being and doing', that is, being able to live the life that one wants to live, encapsulates the essence of the concept. Kabeer (1999:439) argues that achievements can include the 'universally valued functionings' such as proper health, nutrition, and shelter, as indicators of achievements. Thus if systematic gender differences within the satisfaction of basic needs can be observed, this can serve as a measurement of limited agency, while increased equality can serve as an indicator of achievement. However, achievements can also be measured by looking at less noticeable issues, such as the experienced workload among men and women (Kabeer, 1999:439).

However, improved 'universally valued functionings' does not guarantee a change in power relations, or women's ability to influence structures of power. Therefore, Kabeer highlights the importance of evaluating the transformative implications of achievements, in reference to gender structures and inequalities (Kabeer, 1999: 451). Such an approach requires an understanding of the meaningfulness which achievements have on women's lives, as well as to what extent they defy existing gender norms and structures in communities and cultures (Kabeer, 1999). For this reason, the study has, in reference to its inspiration from feminist methodology (see Linabary, & Hamel, 2017:98), decided to first center the experiences of the participants, allowing them to identify the achievements which they themselves consider important to their own empowerment journeys. These stories will later be analyzed against the concept of transformative empowerment outlined by Kabeer (1999: 451). This will allow the analysis to make room for the participants' own understanding of empowerment, rather than imposing an external conception of empowerment onto them, while still being able to situate and analyze the findings against empowerment theory (1999: 451).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study draws inspiration from feminist methodology which adheres to the belief that knowledge is socially constructed. Thus, research should center the experiences of silenced groups to gain new knowledge (Linabary, & Hamel, 2017:98). To contribute to this field, the study conducted a qualitative case study focusing on the lived experiences of the participants in the soap making and selling project. A majority of the empirical material comes from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) in Kibera.

The study conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with widows enrolled in the soap making and selling project, two interviews with administrative personnel, and two focus group discussions with eight and six participants in each. The data was collected in Kibera during an eight-week long period, starting in February 2023 and ending in April of the same year. The data collected from the interviews and FGDs were later transcribed, coded, and analyzed according to the thematic analysis approach.

3.1.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The study utilized qualitative semi-structured interviews as its main methodological approach. The use of interviews holds considerable value as it enables an in-depth discussion with the participants, generating nuanced knowledge on which to base a well-grounded analysis (Mason, 2018:111). Semi-structured interviews also allow for the possibility to tailor each interview to each respondent, allowing the interviewees to have more influence, control, and freedom over the research approach (Mason, 2018:115). This provides the researcher with the ability to identify patterns among the respondents, improving the comprehension of the subject and its contexts (Teorell & Svensson, 2008). The interview guides have been provided in Appendix B of this paper.

Based on the studies by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006:59), the study aimed to carry out a minimum of 12 interviews, as they argue that data saturation normally takes place within the first 12 interviews. All women had to have been enrolled in the soap making and selling project for at least one year and, for ethical reasons, they had to be above 18 years of age. Due to English being the national language of Kenya, a majority of the interviews could be conducted in English. Yet, four interviewees preferred to speak in Swahili, necessitating

the use of an interpreter. To avoid any power imbalances, the interpretation was done by three of the widows who volunteered to translate for their peers, rather than by the group leader or organization personnel as they could have an impact on the answers. One respondent had her son translate for her.

Before participating the interviewees were informed of the purpose and aim of the study, as well as any potential risks of their participation, particularly relating to issues of confidentiality and anonymity. After informed consent had been given, the interviews were recorded to ensure that a correct transcription could be carried out. The recordings were stored on a secure database and any information which could potentially challenge the anonymity of the respondents was removed. The interviews lasted for around 30 minutes to 50 minutes.

3.1.2 Focus Group Discussions

To complement the data collected from individual interviews, the study also conducted two rounds of FGDs. Group discussions allow the respondents to share and discuss their thoughts with others, which can produce a more diverse and nuanced set of insights compared to individual interviews (Hennink, 2014). By utilizing FGDs, the study was able to capture a wide set of perspectives on widow's and women's empowerment, and the challenges of empowerment projects.

The FGDs were carried out in Kibera, at the site of the soap making and selling project. The groups consisted of six and eight participants, aged 33-63, who all shared similar experiences from widowhood. Due to them being enrolled in the soap making and selling project since at least one year back, all respondents were familiar with one another from before, but unfamiliar with the moderator of the FGD to avoid courtesy bias (Hennink, 2014: 40). Each FGD lasted for around one hour each.

The FGDs included a drawing activity aimed at producing fruitful discussions among the participants. Inspired by Linda Mayoux's (2017) work on participatory methods and Merrifield's (2019) research on women's empowerment, the respondents were asked to draw a picture of an 'empowered woman', along with the relationships, resources, and actions available to her. The women were divided into pairs and later presented their drawings in front of the group. The group then discussed the drawings and the similarities and differences between them. At the end of the exercise, two of the widows were chosen to draw one collective picture which exemplified the group's idea of empowerment.

Since a majority of the widows were illiterate or had little skill in reading and writing, drawing presents an opportunity to include people who struggle with communicating through written and spoken word (Mayoux, 2017: 15). Mayoux (2017) draws on lessons from her work using participatory methods, and argues that due to being accessible to all education levels, drawing exercises can increase the confidence of the individual simultaneously as it clarifies communication through visual images (2017:15). In addition, drawing is a useful team-building exercise, which can encourage in-depth discussions among group members, thus allowing drawing activities to function as a data collection strategy (Hennink, 2014: 66).

3.1.3 Respondents and Sampling

The researcher came into contact with the widows enrolled in the soap making and selling project through the study's two partner organizations. From this group of 40 widows, 16 were selected for the interviews, and 14 were selected for the FGD. Due to some overlap, 20 participants in total partook in the study. A random selection strategy was employed to achieve a diverse set of ideas and viewpoints (Hennink, 2014: 41), although availability and openness to being interviewed were likely of importance during the selection process.

Aside from being above the age of 18, having experienced widowhood, and enrolled in the soap making and selling project, there were no requirements for the respondents. However, it proved helpful that all of the respondents had spent at least one year enrolled in the project, as it allowed them to reflect on how the project had developed and helped them over time. The respondents were between the ages of 33-63 and had been enrolled in the business for one to three years. All respondents lived in Kibera and were of similar socio-economic status, with most living in extreme poverty. All widows had children, with the average being five children per mother. Two women also mentioned being responsible, or partially responsible, for the care of their grandchildren. Two of the widows had leadership positions within the group, being in charge of the upkeep of records, organizing the making and selling, and buying the necessary materials.

When selecting administrative personnel for interviews, the study purposefully selected individuals who had been involved in the implementation of the program since the beginning, and who had considerable experience of working with empowerment projects. This provided a useful insight into the history and development of the project, particularly because proper bureaucracy and documentation in Kenya can be hard to come by.

It is important to note that the soap making and selling project itself adapts a form of snowball recruitment strategy when recruiting new participants¹, as the women utilize their network to find new participants. Due to this strategy, it is difficult to avoid any form of familiarity between the participants of the study. Having a group of participants who are previously familiar with each other, is not necessarily a weakness in the study, however, the researcher should be aware that dynamics among the participants may have an impact on their answers, as respondents may give less detailed answers if they are familiar with each others' viewpoints. However, participants who are familiar with each other may feel more comfortable with each other, and in voicing their opinions (Hennink, 2014: 41).

3.2 Thematic Analysis & Operationalization

The study employed a thematic analysis method to code and analyze the data gathered from the FGDs and semi-structured interviews. The method requires a transcribed version of the discussions, which is later broken down into different segments according to the issues raised by the participants. This approach allows the researcher to identify common patterns in the data, acquiring an in-depth understanding of the subject. (Bryman, 2012; Hennink, 2014: 90-91). In this study, the recordings from the interviews and FGDs were first transcribed, to later be analyzed using this approach. By thoroughly analyzing the transcriptions, different phrases were coded by categorizing them under different themes and subthemes. The drawings were analyzed in a similar way, by placing them in the context of the group discussions, and then outlining the resources, agency and achievements which the participants noted as important parts of empowerment.

Settling on the operationalizations of the theoretical framework was a difficult task that required a thorough reflective process. To allow for the participants to define their own process of empowerment and leave room for their stories, the operationalizations were kept relatively fluid and open, with some overlap between the different concepts.

Inspired by Kabeer, the operationalization of resources focused on going beyond the simple 'access' to resources, by also focusing on the participants' ability to utilize the resources available to them (Kabeer, 1999:444). This can at times be difficult to measure but was acquired by first looking into the de facto resources which were provided by the

¹ Information on the projects recruitment strategy was gained through discussions with the administrators and participants.

organization, such as the annual payment, micro-loans, training in soap making, education on business making, and the social relations between the group members. I later analyzed the members' access and ability to exercise control over the provided resources, by asking which resources had helped them in their daily lives, and which of the resources they found to be the most important. Each topic of material, cognitive, and relational resources was discussed, and the participants were asked if there were any additional resources that they had wished that they would have received but that the project had not provided them with.

Due to the participants being widows, typical definitions of agency which focus on the distribution of power and decision-making between wife and husband were of less relevance in this study (Kabeer, 1999:446). Instead, the study focused on the widows' ability to exercise agency within the project and the resources provided by it. This was observed by asking questions about the decision-making process in the group and whether the participants felt as if they had a say in the decision-making process. Thorough discussions were dedicated to whether the widows felt as if they had a say in how the profits were distributed and spent, and whether they felt as if this was done in a fair and just way. The interviews and FGDs also allowed room for discussions on the more informal decision-making processes, such as informal discussions between the widows and the administrators of the project. The study later analyzed the collective agency of the group by looking at its collective decision-making processes, and plans for the future. The data collection process also focused on the participants' ability to practice transformative agency, that is, whether they were able to challenge wider societal and gender norms which make up the root causes of inequality (Kabeer, 1999: 451).

To measure achievements the study analyzed the bigger picture of the project, and how this had affected the overall situation of the women after joining the project as compared to their situation before joining the project. This was done by first focusing on what the participants of the study identified as meaningful achievements, rather than imposing an external definition of achievement and empowerment. The study looked at the overall impact that the project had had on the lives of the women, and how the different resources provided by the project interacted and contributed to empowerment. Similarly to the analysis of agency, I also focused on the transformative effects of the project and to which degree it managed to challenge foundational social and gender norms, by asking whether the widows had experienced a difference in their social status and their treatment from the wider society, as a result of joining the project. Great attention was also paid to how the participants described

their own situation, whether they identified themselves as 'empowered', and how they described their overall being in comparison to that before joining the project.

3.3 Limitations

A language barrier could be felt at times, when the participants expressed that they had a hard time vocalizing their thoughts in their second or third language. To bridge the language barrier, I ensured to practice patience and give each participant the time and space necessary to find their words. On a few occasions, I made use of online translating programs, such as Google Translate, to assist in the communication process. Further, the drawing exercise in the FGD helped breach the language barrier, as it provided an alternative form of communication.

Four interviews were carried out using interpreters, as the participants preferred to speak in Swahili. Despite knowing that the use of interpreters increases the risk of misunderstandings and mistranslations (Mason, 2018), I considered it important to include these interviewees, since I learned from my host organization that proficiency in English is often associated with higher levels of education in Kenya. Thus, I was concerned that only including the stories of fluent English speakers would miss the perspectives of the most marginalized group members, thus harming the internal generalization of the study (see Maxwell, 1992 on internal generalizability).

A second limitation was time, as the fieldwork was limited to a period of eight weeks. Thus, I was only able to spend a brief period with the community, limiting my opportunity to observe and engage with the project and its members. Consequently, the study is small in its scope, which complicates a wider generalization based on the study. While external generalizability is not the primary goal of the study, the findings can provide important insights into the lived experiences of widows, a perspective that is crucial to take into consideration when formatting future development programs.

Lastly, something should be said about the trustworthiness of the study. As the operationalizations of validity and reliability are highly contested within qualitative research, the application of such terms is complicated (Morse, 1999). Yet, careful consideration of what constitutes good quality research was considered during the research process. Robson (2002) highlights that studies of an interpretative nature risk jeopardizing its validity through biases, by imposing a meaning onto the collected data. To prevent this risk, the study took inspiration from Mason (1996), who argues that the researcher must prepare to continually justify each

step through which the interpretation is made (1996:150). I applied this practice throughout my coding and eventual analysis, to provide a clear outline of the interpretation process.

Robson (2002) highlights, the researcher should concern themselves with the topic of reliability by ensuring that they practice transparency and thoroughness during the research process (2002:173). Thus, I made sure to keep clear records of my raw data, including my field notes and interview and FGD transcripts. Further, I had honest communications with my university and supervisor and practiced reflexivity during the research process.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

It is no secret that fieldwork conducted in the Global South carries a colonial legacy of exploitation, which has done little to empower the vulnerable populations that research so often has ‘talked over’ and ‘written about’. Yet, the fear of continued (mis)representation has generated a reluctance towards engaging in fieldwork in the Global South. While the ethics of fieldwork is a crucial issue, the reluctance towards conducting fieldwork in the Global South means that fewer scholars choose to engage in research projects which have the potential to be useful for vulnerable populations (Sultana, 2007: 375). Nagar (2002) and Sultana (2007), argue that this deadlock can be overcome, as long as the researcher is mindful of the critiques, and if they undertake a “research that is more politically engaged, materially grounded, and institutionally sensitive” (Sultana, 2007: 375).

For this study, I carefully considered and weighed the potential harm that could come from participating in the study, against the potential positive impact which the study could have on the lives of the interviewees. I considered ethics a dynamic process, which developed alongside the entirety of the research. This began by considering my position as a Western researcher and master’s student, conducting research with particularly vulnerable populations in Kenya.

3.4.1 Reflexivity & Positionality

Sultana (2007) draws on insights gained from her fieldwork in Bangladesh and argues that that researchers should practice reflexivity throughout the study, which involves “reflection on self, process, and representation, and critically examining power relations and politics in the research process, and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation” (Sultana, 2007: 376). The researcher should as part of this process also

consider their positionality, which refers to the position the researcher holds in relation to the study and its subjects (Sultana, 2007: 376; Stewart-Withers et al. 2014: 61-62). It is of special importance to reflect over such subjects when conducting fieldwork with vulnerable populations, as power relations and ethical dilemmas are more likely to arise (Scheyvens, Scheyvens & Murray 2014:206; Stewart-Withers et al. 2014: 61-62).

The research process brought with it many issues worthy of consideration. I found myself reflecting on the insider-outsider spectrum mentioned by Scheyvens, Scheyvens, and Murray's (2014) as a big worry of mine was that my 'outsiderness', along with the educational gap between me and the interviewees, would cause them to feel less comfortable speaking to me. I also worried that the colonial history of Kenya would cause a lack of trust between us. However, while being an outsider can be an obstacle to the study process, I found that it did bring certain advantages to the research process as well. I was met with great hospitality upon my arrival, which encouraged small talk and culture sharing, which I believe benefited the relationship between me and the research participants. Similarly to Herod (1999), I also found that my 'outsiderness' made me more comfortable asking for things to be clearly explained as I lacked some contextual and cultural knowledge due to my status as a foreigner. For this reason, I managed to gain a lot of detailed data from the interviews and FGDs.

A second worry of mine related to the risk of my affiliation with the administration getting in the way of the research, since the interviewees could perceive me as being employed by the administration. This could create a power imbalance between us and have a large impact on the gathered data, for example by producing a courtesy bias (Sultana, 2007). To avoid this issue, I made sure to acknowledge the fact that I was not employed by any of my partner organizations, and thus encouraged the participants to feel comfortable to speak freely about their experience with the soap project and the administrators. I emphasized the fact that I was there to hear their honest opinions and that there were no right or wrong answers. I further stated that this was an independent study to learn more about the empowerment of widows and that their personal stories are of great importance for this aim. Lastly, I made sure to state that participation is voluntary and that the participants have the right to refrain from participating.

Further, it was necessary to consider the risk of harming the participants by taking up their time, which brought up the topic of compensation. Compensation or payment is a controversial topic in development research. On the one hand, participants should have a right to be compensated for their contributions, particularly if they risk losing income by taking

time away from work. On the other hand, compensation can lead to a power imbalance between the researcher and the research participants, and influence the collected data (Hammett & Sporton, 2012: 497-498). To balance these different ideas, the decision was made that the participants should be compensated for traveling fees and food costs during the day, amounting to 400 KES (32 SEK) to each respondent. This amount was decided on after thorough discussions had been held with my host organization, to come up with an appropriate sum. Considering that regular public transportation and food costs in the area range from 50 to 100 KES (3.7 to 7.4 SEK) each, the calculations were made generously to ensure that the participants would not lose money.

In addition, the interviews were held during the weekly Saturday meeting, where the group members make soap together. This was done so that the interviews and FGDs would take as little time away from the participants' paid work as possible, as the other members could continue the soap-making process while one of the participants was being interviewed.

3.4.2 Informed Consent and Confidentiality

Informed consent entails that the participants of the study have, with a full understanding of the research project, freely agreed to be part of it. To achieve this, the researcher must ensure that the participants have a complete and thorough understanding of the research process, its aims, and purposes, as well as any risks which may arise from participating in the project. This is achieved through clear and honest communication where the researcher explains the research topic, aims, and methods. Further, it is of importance that the participant's right to refrain from participating is communicated (Israel, 2015; Banks & Scheyvens, 2014:164).

For this study, due to cultural norms and a high prevalence of illiteracy, consent was communicated verbally. Upon arrival, I made sure to present the study, its aims, and methods, to the group through a short presentation. Each interview and FGD began with an in-depth discussion with the participants, where the purposes and aims of the study were repeated and any potential harms which could come from participating were discussed. Further, I communicated the aims of the study, whilst being realistic and humble towards the fact that this is only a small, master's level thesis that few will read.

To ensure anonymity the study employed pseudonyms when referencing interviews. To further ensure confidentiality, the study avoided recording any unnecessary sensitive

information, and stored the data on a secured and password-protected server, as recommended by Banks & Scheyvens (2014:164). Since close-knit communities have an easier time identifying each other, thus jeopardizing the anonymity of the participants this risk was communicated to the interviewees before their participation (Israel, 2015).

3.4.3 Sensitive Topics and the Risk of Retraumatization

When conducting research with particularly vulnerable populations, the researcher should consider the risk of inducing potential harm to the participants, particularly when the study touches on sensitive topics as it risks imposing psychological distress or trauma onto the participants (Israel, 2015). As Stake (2010) puts it, it is not enough to simply state that “their story needs to be told” (2010:210) as justification for engaging in sensitive topics, particularly when the power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee risks pressuring participants into sharing traumatizing stories.

The study focused primarily on the participants’ experiences in the soap making and selling project, and thus, for the most part, the subject of discussion was quite lighthearted. On two occasions I did however observe that two participants began sharing instances of SGBV during the interviews. This happened when I asked questions about what the participants considered to be their biggest challenges in life as widows. While I wanted to ensure that the participants felt free to share their stories, I was concerned that they would feel pressured into sharing experiences that may be traumatizing for them. For this reason, the decision was made to remove some questions from the interview guide relating to the challenges of widowhood. Following this decision, no such stories came up again during the interviews. However, since SGBV is a widespread issue in Kibera, (WAY Empowerment, 2020) and previous research has showcased that widows are especially vulnerable to experiencing such violence (The Loomba Foundation, 2016: 91), I discussed the issue with the administrators to come up with a solution to how we could assist the group members who had faced SGBV. It turned out that NEPHAK had a budget dedicated to helping SGBV survivors acquire legal aid, and I thus invited the administration to hold an information meeting about SGBV, women’s rights, and how the participants can access legal aid.

To further ensure that the participants did not feel pressured into sharing stories that they did not want to, I made sure to inform the interviewees before each interview and FGD that they did have to answer any questions which they did not feel comfortable talking about.

They were also informed that they were free to decline to participate or end the interview at any point.

4. Findings & Analysis

In the following chapter, I have dedicated one section for each of the research questions. Beginning with the first research question, the analysis looks at the dimension of resources and outlines the key resources provided by the soap making and selling project, and how the participants conceive these to have influenced their lives. Though this discussion is divided according to the three different types of resources outlined by Kabeer; material, cognitive and relational, the interviews and FGDs provided evidence of interconnectedness between the resources, and a discussion is dedicated to this issue in the concluding chapter of this paper.

In the following section, I dedicate the analysis to the second research question, by looking at how the participants expressed individual and collective agency as a result of the soap project. By first looking at the issue of individual agency, the analysis discusses the participants' ability to visualize ideas of empowerment, and their ability to formulate plans and act on them to reach their vision of empowerment. The section on collective empowerment discusses the power dynamics within the group, and its capacity of formulating collective decisions and plans. I further analyze the transformative impacts of the project, by looking at its ability to challenge social norms and power dynamics in the wider community.

The last section responds to the third research question, by analyzing the achievements of the project. Beginning by looking into 'universally-valued functionings', that is the project's ability to secure the basic needs of the group (Kabeer: 1999: 439), it later investigates larger achievements that go beyond the basic need for survival. This is done by looking at the achievements which the participants themselves outline as the most crucial impacts of the project, and how this has influenced their own daily lives. The study later discusses the wider impact of the project by analyzing its transformative impact on the wider community.

Before beginning the analysis, it is important to note one issue with the data. It became evident that a majority of the participants had a positive attitude toward the project, expressing little critique of its' achievements, processes, and structure. In fact, only four of the twenty participants expressed disappointment towards not having realized their visions of empowerment, mostly attributing this to the lack of capital gained from the project. The same participants did however uplift other aspects of the project which they considered valuable,

such as the relations, skills, and knowledge gained from it. To stimulate a fruitful analysis, I have allowed some additional room for these critical voices, despite them being in the minority, since I believe that analyzing the cases where the project has been less successful will provide a necessary insight into the shortcomings of economic empowerment projects.

4.1 Resources

4.1.1 Material Resources

When asked about the central challenges of being a widow, many of the respondents highlighted their material reality as a large obstacle. The respondents noted that being the lone breadwinner of the household, without a spouse to share this responsibility with, made them experience stress. Often struggling to generate enough income to cover basic needs, such as food, rent, school fees, and clothes, there is little money left for savings or larger purchases for their businesses and households.

“It is difficult because maybe the children want something or maybe I need something, but I have to fight it out alone. I don't have someone to support me. Even if it is the end month, I need to pay my house rent, I just have to look for the money by myself. [...] I'm not able to save. I get little and the little I get, I end up spending everything. I don't have any saving for emergency. Yeah, like for hospital”(Anna, 39, Kibera).

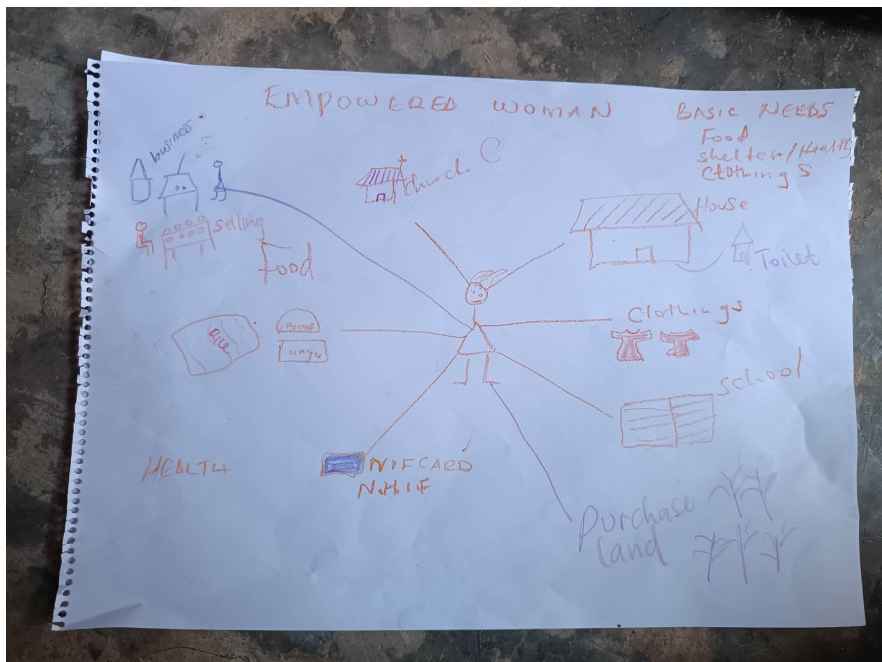


Figure 1: FGD Drawing

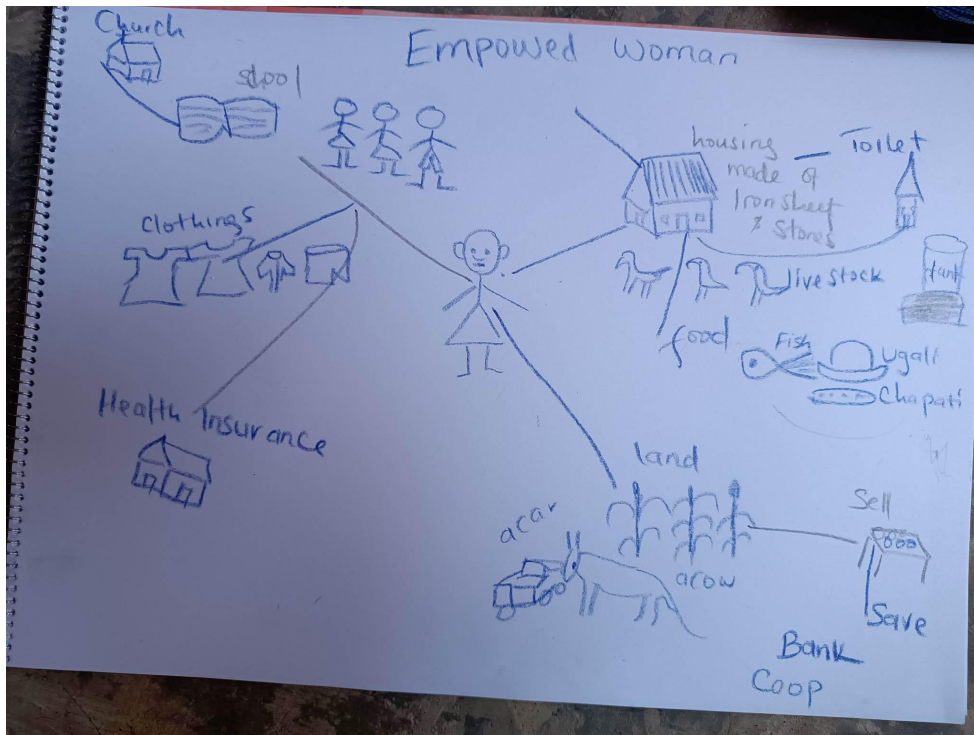


Figure 2: FGD Drawing

Material resources were a common subject of discussion in the FGDs as well. Figures 1 and 2 show two drawings from the FGD groups, which picture two empowered women, each surrounded by the resources which the interviewees identified as central to empowerment. The participants started by outlining the ‘universally-valued functionings’, (1999: 439), such as clothing, proper food, a proper house with an iron roof and a toilet, and education for their children. Many participants found that being empowered meant that one had ‘enough’ money, which women would gain through their businesses. A majority of the women in the project had side businesses, such as tailoring businesses and kiosks where they sold food and goods. Religion and church also held a key role in many drawings, since religious institutions functioned as a source of hope and community.

The participants also expressed more complex ideas of empowerment which went beyond resources as basic needs. The second figure shows a visualization of two of the participants' ideas of empowerment, where the woman manages to purchase land, which in turn produces goods that she can sell for a profit in her self-owned business. If she later saves this money in a bank, she could use it to make larger purchases and investments, such as livestock, a car, more land, and health insurance, which could improve her quality of life.

The individual interviews gave evidence of how some of the group members had already begun their empowerment journeys. The main material resources gained from the

project were the profits from the sales which were distributed according to each participant's sales records once a year, in combination with the merry-go-rounds which collected donations from all group members to each participant once a year. In the individual interviews, many of the participants expressed that while the income generated from the soap project did not cover all their necessities and expenses, the profits had had a positive impact on their financial situation, and they noted these material benefits as a major contributor to why they joined the project and chose to stay.

While a majority of the money gained from the project was spent on covering basic needs, such as food, clothes, rent, school fees, and utensils, many of the respondents noted that they were able to save some of the income for larger purchases, such as mattresses and pots for their homes. One participant states that she was saving up money for materials for a new house, which would have more of a long-term impact on their quality of life.

“Nowadays I'm able to buy food for my children. I'm able to take my children to school and also planning after savings. I get little and little from this project and from other groups. I'm saving to buy stones and I build my own house so that I if I go at home, I get myself a house.” (Beatrice, 46, Kibera).

Some respondents noted that they had been able to reinvest in their own businesses, by buying materials and machines which allowed them to gain more income in the future. Having savings also provided the group members with some funds which they could rely on in the event of an emergency. Many of the respondents noted that the project had had a significant impact on their financial situation and that they experienced less stress as a result of this.

While the group participants only receive an actual income from the annual payment and the merry-go-rounds, the study found that the weekly earnings had a significant impact on the lives of the widows, despite them having to be returned to the shared savings at the end of the week. As one participant noted:

“The period [of selling soap] is long. That one week, I can use it [the profits], then I bring back later. You can use the money first and then make new and bring it back. So I don't have to sleep on an empty stomach, and I have money from the soap”. (Josephine, 55, Kibera).

Since many of the widows found that the soap could be sold early in the week, they were able to utilize the income before having to return the 250 KES to the group at the end of

the week. This could be done by using some of the income to buy necessities or reinvesting it into their own businesses. At times, this could help them generate even more income, which allowed them to return with the 250 KES to the group.

Some widows expressed disappointment towards the fact that they had not earned as much money from the project as they had believed they would when first joining, and that they were not able to sustain themselves solely on the money gained from the soap project. This finding was especially common among newer recruits.

“When I joined the soap project, they were telling us selling soaps, doing business, coming together. I saw it as a big dream, eh? Of which we are still pursuing on. But as for now, it's no benefit. Because it's something now we are building and we are still molding. I can't rely that I'll get what [I need]. I don't sell that soap for a profit. So there is no benefit I'm getting as for now.”
(Cornelia, 39, Kibera).

“December what I got from the Jama was 1000. Of which I fail to understand is it money from Jama they are giving us for Christmas, [or] is it our profit? I just got 1000. So I fail to understand, is it a profit from something, is the project buying widows christmas [gifts]?”
(Cornelia, 39, Kibera).

In the interview above, the participant expressed frustration with the lack of insight and information about the organization and structure of the project. She is unsure whether the money she got in December, which was the annual payment based on each participant's sales records, was the profit that she had made, or whether it was a donation from the organization. While only a few of the interviewees expressed these concerns, and all other interviewees seemed to be informed of the purposes of the business structure and savings of the project, this gave evidence of issues with communicating the purposes and organization of the project to newer recruits. These communication and transparency issues risk posing a problem to the project, as the lack of information makes it hard for the participants to give their informed consent to participate in the project. Further, the project risks hindering the empowerment process, if the participants feel as if they have no control or insight into how the resources are spent and handled, and if the benefits of their participation are not big enough to make up for the increased work burden.

While some expressed less frustration and disappointment, a few of the interviewees still admitted that the income they had received from the project so far, was not enough to make a meaningful impact on their daily life. This was more common among women who had

recently joined the project, as well as those who had not managed to sell as much soap as others, and as a result, received less income. Despite this, many still recognized the importance of being part of such projects, as it allows them to gain new skills, knowledge, and a social network. Thus, many still expressed strong beliefs in the project, and that the material and relational resources had made it worth it for them. Many noted that the project was still young and that as it grows more benefits will come. Similarly, when the participant above was asked if she regretted joining the project, and whether she felt like it had been worth her time, she still expressed positive feelings towards the project, particularly by highlighting the cognitive and relational resources which she had gained, such as learning how to make soap and making new friends. While still disappointed with the earnings, she argued that these aspects made the project valuable for her.

Similarly, many respondents mentioned how the skills and knowledge they had gained could help them generate additional material resources. For example, knowing how to make soap was considered a valuable skill, since this provided the individual with the opportunity to create their own soap business, outside of the group project. One respondent argued that the soap-making skills which she had gained from joining the project, meant that she had a valuable skill that could help her generate income. This meant that even if the project would end, or if she had to move away, she would be able to use this skill to support herself.

“The knowledge of knowing how to make things is more [important] because people don't know how to make those type of soap. Yeah. So if you at 60, I know, yeah, I go back home, then I start [making and selling soap].” (Josephine, 55, Kibera)

Another participant noted that she had been able to use her soap-making skills to make soap for herself and her family, allowing her to save some money since she no longer had to buy soap. She had also created her own side business where she sold soap for some additional income.

“The experience is good. because since I started I never knew how to make soap. But for real, I do even make soap for my mom at home instead of buying for her soap. Because at home we use salty water. I make this soap. It is good for salty water. I send to mom back home in the rural. And I can also sell my soap. Yeah, and get my own money.” (Anna, 39, Kibera).

A majority of the respondents also related their material empowerment to the relational aspect of the project. Their new-found social network meant that they would not be

completely on their own, would they experience economic hardship. Many uplifted the tight-knit community among the widows in the project, and their ability to rely on each others' help. This meant that if one widow was in trouble, the others would chip in and support her according to their ability.

“I have support. If I don't have [something], I can ask ‘Can you lend me something?’. I feel happier because they are like my sisters. If something happens to me, they have to yeah, chip in or come. So it helps you.” (Josephine, 55, Kibera).

As previously mentioned, the collective savings also functioned as a microloan system to which the participants could turn to take out a loan, either as a way to relieve them of economic hardship or as a way to allow them to make larger purchases or investments in their businesses and households. Here, it is worth discussing the potential issue of the participants' access to the material resources of the project. Aside from the annual share of profits and merry-go-rounds, the group members cannot access the money that they have earned, unless it is through a loan, which they later have to pay back at an interest rate. Since many widows already carry a double or triple work burden, the project risks pushing an additional work burden onto the participants, while simultaneously hindering their access to the resources and income which they have generated into the project. Considering that several authors on material empowerment have noted the issue with microloan systems, as they risk further indebting women, causing an additional financial burden and deteriorating mental health for those who struggle to repay loans (Isserles, 2003; Roberts & Zulfqar, 2019; Ochman & Ortega-Díaz, 2020: 3), this was a key concern of the study.

However, those who had taken out a loan expressed positive feelings toward this system. None of the participants reported that they had experienced increased stress as a result of the loan. Rather, the participants expressed the opposite, that knowing that they could take out loans relieved their stress, knowing that they had funds to rely on during tough economic times. Highlighting the difficulties for women in Kibera to access capital from regular banks through loans, they argued that the microloan system of the collective savings provided them with an opportunity to access funds that they could use to start or invest in their businesses, allowing them to become more self-reliant.

For example, one participant noted that the loan had allowed her to purchase an overlock sewing machine for her tailoring business. Overlock machines produce a special kind of seam for hemming, and by owning one herself, she no longer had to pay for

overlocking her garments at another tailor, allowing her to save money in the long run, simultaneously as the additional machine allows her to produce more garments, making her business grow.

“I managed to purchase another new machine, for sewing. It's called overlock for doing the hemming. I bought a second hand one at the price of 3000. The money that I got from the project. I used to go and do it at my neighbor at a price of five shillings per one cloth. So now I don't go and do it. I do it myself at no price.” (Anna, 39, Kibera).

Another participant used her soap-making skills to start her own soap-making business, using the money from her loan to buy chemicals that she needed for the production process.

“I used that loan to buy chemicals, to make [soap] for myself, not here as a group, for my own personal [business]. So here, we make as a group, but I make myself too.” (Esther, 41, Kibera).

Additionally, none of the participants reported struggling with the additional work burden, often highlighting the easy and fast process of making soap. While some did note that they would at times struggle with sales, they still considered the project worth their time.

When asked if she felt any worry regarding the repayment of the loan, the participant stated that she had managed to pay it back, especially highlighting the flexibility of the repayment. In her role as a chair lady, she further uplifted the importance of informing the participants of the loan process, conveying the expectations and potential risks when taking out a loan. She further noted that the group had not had any issues with participants not repaying the loan, as the group ensured that the member would be able to repay the loan before approving it, and exercised flexibility in the repayment process if any issues would arise.

4.1.2 Cognitive Resources

Cognitive resources refer to processes of increased awareness, self-reflection, and the possibility of considering alternative journeys in life. Kabeer particularly centers the importance of increased awareness of gender norms and inequalities, as these often dictate the opportunities women consider to be possible for them (Kabeer, 2011: 511).

One of the administrators noted that the cognitive aspect of empowerment had been one of the biggest challenges at the beginning of the project. Strict gender norms made many of the participants believe that they were not capable of, or should not, engage in business, since they believed that it was not a woman's place. This made many skeptical and unwilling to indulge in the business at the start of the project.

“The biggest challenge is the cultural mind of the women, because they're not accustomed to working, since most of them stayed at home before [becoming a widow]. They don't believe it's a woman's place.” (Petra, Administrator).

However, the same administrator said that following group discussions on gender norms and business, many of the participants grew less skeptical. In many of the individual interviews, the participants expressed that they felt happier and more self-confident after having joined the project. They argued that they had been able to challenge norms and discriminatory perceptions of widows, who did not believe them capable of successfully conducting business. Many of the respondents felt that their self-confidence had increased since engaging in business, due to gaining new skills, knowledge, and a community. They expressed that they felt more capable and self-reliant, and more confident in expressing their opinions and ideas. The interviewees took pride in their ability to ‘work hard’ and stand on their own two feet.

“When I came, I was a bit shy. But now if I go outside, I can provide my ideas and people can, other women can listen to me. It gives me courage that I know something. Yeah, I know something and I can stand in front of others, to say what I want to.” (Josephine, 55, Kibera).

While the material aspects of the project provided an inducement to join the project, the opportunity to gain new skills and knowledge was among the most commonly mentioned reasons for joining the project. Many referred to the opportunity to gain experience in entrepreneurship and leadership as well as learning soap-making skills, as the main motivation to join the project. These resources were often mentioned in relation to material resources, as increased knowledge and skill provided the participants with a greater ability to support themselves economically. For example, having soap-making skills was uplifted as a particularly important part of the participants' empowerment journeys, since having this skill allowed them to make soap at home, meaning that they no longer had to spend as much

money on buying soap for themselves. Others were inspired by the project and created side businesses where they made and sold their self-made soap.

Those who had participated in the business classes at the beginning of the project uplifted these teachings as important contributors to their empowerment as well. Gaining an education in business and economics provided them with valuable knowledge which they could use in their businesses and private economies. One participant noted that after having taken part in this education she had been able to apply her knowledge on savings and reinvestment into her own business.

“It really helped me, especially to do my savings. I never knew that I should also put my salary in my business. I learned from that teaching that I should not just take money from the business, but instead I write myself a salary. Yeah, so that the rest of the money can be in the business. I just take my salary.” (Maryann, 50, Kibera).

Many also related their new-found confidence to the relational aspect of the project, arguing that having a social network to rely on and being close to other widows who experience similar challenges, made them feel more secure and confident. The participants noted that they had learned valuable lessons from the rest of the group, as the project allowed them to discuss their common issues and share ideas.

“I felt it was good to join other widows so that we can share our ideas. Because there are some older widows who have been here before me. So we like to share [among] widows. Because I was very young by the time I was widowed, so I like to share ideas with other older widows. So I hoped to receive some skills, yeah, and some knowledge.” (Anna, 39, Kibera).

The project also provided an opportunity for those in leadership positions to develop leadership skills. When those who held these positions were asked why they believed that they had acquired them, they referred to a variety of positively regarded personality traits, such as being ‘smart’, ‘good with numbers’, ‘good with people’, and ‘motivational’. One referred to the previous responsibilities which she had taken on, such as organizing local elections, arguing that she was a ‘natural leader’ and thus naturally sought out such positions. In this sense, the project created space for them to develop their leadership and organization skills, by allowing them to take on responsibilities of the projects’ meetings, business plans, records, and funds. The participants who had held leadership positions noted how this had provided a valuable experience for them, as they felt more capable in their communication,

organizational, and business skills. Further, they noted how this had allowed them to increase their confidence and self-esteem.

Several participants stated that the knowledge and skills gained from the project and the other widows had inspired them to create their own businesses, despite previously being skeptical of their ability as women to conduct business. This provides evidence of how the project contributes to the critical consciousness of the individuals, as critical consciousness allows women to self-reflect on themselves, their relations, and their environment. Thus, the skills and knowledge provided by the project and by women coming together, made it possible for the participants to envision a potentially better life, and to later act on this idea which was previously unimaginable (Cornwall, 2016; Kabeer, 2011; 511).

4.1.3 Relational Resources

All interviews provided evidence of how patriarchal communities had led to a loss of social status and support within the communities. The participants recalled stories of social exclusion and isolation, as several of the interviewees noted that they had lost all their friends due to their status as a widow, and been excluded from the social life of the community due to cultural superstitions. One interviewee stated that the married women of her village prohibited her from speaking to their husbands, due to concerns that she would take a romantic interest in their spouse.

“If you talk with a man, they think you are going to take this man and they think that you are going to bed [with him]. ‘Josephine is standing with that man, now she wants to date that man’, but it’s not on your mind. You’re just maybe talking”. (Josephine, 55, Kibera).

Others recalled how their new status as a widow had made their in-laws turn on them, often robbing them of their belongings and chasing them away from the community, resulting in the loss of both property and a social network. The participants stated how the wider community would regard them as worthless, and a burden on the community. The hostile attitudes from others made it difficult for them to engage in the trade, business, and daily life of the community.

“Yes, The fact that we are widows, and sometimes we don't meet our [needs], someone will see you as a beggar. Yeah, we need to come to that place to borrow something, they just say that you will not manage to pay.” (Wanja, 40, Kibera).

“As a widow, they see you as a prostitute. They think that without a husband, you are worthless, so they chase you away”. (Theresa, 45, Kibera).

In both the FGDs and individual interviews, many noted the importance of having friends and joining communities, such as the soap project, to not be on their own. The participants uplifted the project's ability to bring widows together, allowing them to gain a social network on which they could rely, and this relieved them of the mental strain of being isolated from the community. As previously noted, several participants stated how the social network contributed to their material empowerment since the group was able to support members in financial trouble, relieving them of the stress of providing for their families.

The interviewees also noted that the social network was a place for them to share their problems and ideas, which allowed them to receive support and encouragement from the members.

“We are fine since all of us are widows. So like, we share one common problem, yeah. So we take it, assist us. Yeah, it is nice because we understand each others' problems.” (Olivia, 37, Kibera).

One member also noted that while being able to get help from others had a positive impact on her daily life and well-being, the ability to help others had a significant impact on her self-confidence, as it made her regard her situation and capabilities differently.

Anna: “Nowadays you don't feel alone for there are some widows who have bigger problems, so I feel that my problem is not that big. So you will gain energy to help someone. Say I'm a widow, yes, but I can also help my fellow widow.” (Anna, 39, Kibera).

Interviewer: “How does it feel to help others?”

Anna: “I feel very great because before, I thought that I was the one in the lowest rank. But if I can find myself helping someone it means I'm not bad. I'm not the poorest. Yeah, at least I can get something to help someone.” (Anna, 39, Kibera).

The interviews showcased how the project provided a potential for collective empowerment, as the participants expanded their communities and gained new skills and knowledge (Cornwall, 2016). It was evident that the participants highly valued their relationships with the other women in the group, and as a result experienced less stress from social isolation. Thus, as stated by Kabeer, the economic incentives of the soap making and selling project, seem to have bridged a source of collective empowerment (2011: 513).

4.2 Agency

4.2.1 Individual Agency

Agency, defined as the individual's ability to define goals and act upon them (Kabeer, 1999: 438), was expressed by the members' ability to visualize a plan for the future, which they could realize by making use of the resources available from the project. This was especially apparent during the FGDs, where the drawings and discussions outlined the plans of the participants. In Figure 3 below, the FGD drawing pictures an empowerment process, of how a woman who is initially 'shy', 'insecure', and 'skinny' (not enough food, poor nutrition, and health), can start her own business with the use of the material resources, knowledge, and skills which she has learned from the project, to be able to send her children to school and give them proper food. The pictured person on the left represents a more empowered version of the same woman, who is noticeably bigger (stronger and healthier as a result of proper nutrition). The participants who drew the picture also emphasized mental and physical strength by writing the word "strong" next to the picture. During the discussions, they further stated that after becoming empowered, she is now happier and more self-reliant, as she can "stand on her own two feet" (Wanja, 40, Kibera).

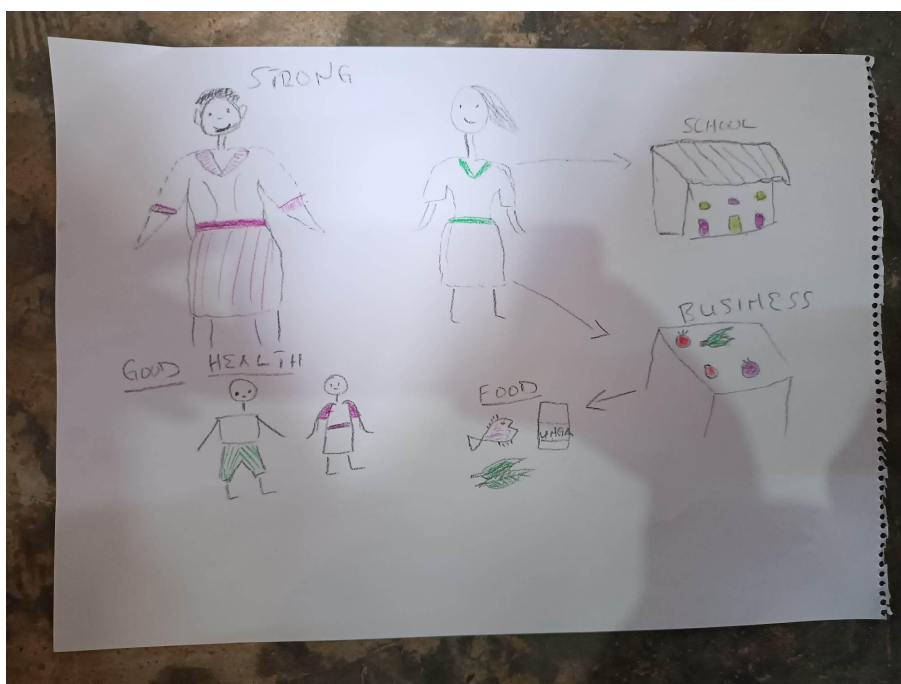


Figure 3: FGD Drawing.

The degree to which these plans had been actualized varied greatly from participant to participant. Some noted that they already identified as being empowered women, and contrasted their lives now to that before joining the project, highlighting how they felt more financially secure, more confident in their knowledge and skills, and as if they had a community to which they belonged. These interviewees attributed this success to the resources they had received from the project, noting that they had had a significant impact on their ability to realize their ideas of empowerment, but also on their own abilities, such as being strong, hard-working, and smart.

This was especially evident among those who had been in the project for a longer time and managed to sell more soap and gain a larger profit. Using these profits they had been able to make large purchases and/or investments which had a positive impact on their businesses and daily life. While some of these seemed to rather be a form of efficient agency, such as with the women who had bought pots to ease the cooking process, or mattresses to make their homes more comfortable, others had managed to utilize agency which significantly increased their access to resources and living standards in the community. For example, this was the case with the participant who was able to buy a sewing machine, or the participant who had used her loan to buy ingredients for making soap (see page 41). Further, they highlighted how the knowledge and skills they had acquired from the project had been useful in their private life and personal businesses.

Others expressed that the project had not successfully helped them achieve their ideas of empowerment, often relating this to the lack of capital from the project. This was more common among newer recruits, who had not taken part in soap making and selling for very long, leading them to receive less profit. A majority of these participants still expressed a belief that the project would help them become more empowered in the future, and were able to outline relatively clear plans for how they would be able to utilize the opportunities from the project, to reach their idea of empowerment. For example, one participant noted how she had received less profits from the year prior, but was now motivated to work hard on her soap selling so that she would gain a higher profit, eventually leading to a more secure financial situation.

“Last year, I did not sell much, ‘cause I joined the project late. But this year I work hard, I sell soap so I will get more profit.” (Layla, 60, Kibera).

A few participants did express disappointment towards the fact that the project so far had not been able to contribute to their empowerment journey in a significant way, attributing this to the lack of capital. While still acknowledging that the project had provided them with a valuable community, skills, and knowledge, these participants felt that the project had had a small effect on their economic empowerment.

Here, the data showcased a distinction between the project's impact on early v. newer recruits. While the earlier recruits expressed that they had been able to practice agency over the resources gained from the project to their benefit, resulting in them identifying themselves as empowered, the later recruits had not experienced the same empowerment journey, often struggling to transform their ideas of empowerment into actual achievements.

Since only four of the interviewees were newer recruits, this phenomenon is difficult to analyze, however, it might be a sign that the project needs time before it can have an impact on the individual's life, or that the results of the project will vary, depending on how much time and effort is put into it. However, some participants attributed their lack of capital to increased competition in the market, as other actors outside of the project had begun producing soap as well. While some were still able to utilize the 250 KES during the week before having to return it to the group, (see page 37), this was mainly done to cover basic survival needs, or for smaller purchases to their households and businesses. While it did relieve them of some stress to provide for their families, there was little evidence that this had a larger, empowering impact. Therefore, these results more so seemed to embody the form of

efficient agency which Kabeer speaks of, rather than a meaningful form of transformative agency (Kabeer 2005: 16).

Common among all participants, despite how well they had been able to realize their empowerment journeys, was that they were able to control the resources within their household. Previous research into empowerment projects has highlighted the issue that while women's access to resources may be increased, this may have little impact on their lives, as the power dynamics within the household may not allow them to practice agency over them (Kabeer, 2011). While the participants of this study were widows, it is possible that other male relatives will control their resources. However, this did not seem to be the case. The participants stated that they were the ones who decide what they do with their income and other resources, and expressed pride relating to their investments into their businesses or larger purchases for their households. Household power dynamics, therefore, seemed to be less of a concern in this study, as the participants showed a high capacity for individual agency over their resources.

The interviews and FGDs also showed that the individuals were able to exercise agency in the decision-making processes of the group. During the time of the research, the project was run by the group members themselves, with little assistance from WAY and NEPHAK, which allowed the group members to have control over the project. Though having a voice and being listened to, does not necessarily equal having influence or agency over resources, as stated by Cornwall (2003: 1329) a majority of the participants noted that the project had a flat structure, with decisions being made collectively by the group members. While some participants held leadership positions, a majority of the interviewees still felt that there was a high level of equality among the members and that they felt secure in voicing their ideas and concerns to the rest of the group. Many widows expressed joy in relation to this as they felt proud of being part of the project, its administration, and the decision-making processes.

There were however exceptions to this rule. The interview mentioned on page 38 showcased how one group member expressed frustration towards, what she considered, a lack of communication and transparency in the project. While only one of the participants expressed these frustrations, it provides some evidence of how not all participants felt included in the decision-making processes of the project. Since this woman was a newer recruit, it might be that the group struggles to communicate its purposes and organization to its newer members. These communication and transparency issues risk hindering the process of empowerment, if the participants have little agency and insight into how the resources of the project are handled, and if the benefits of their participation are not big enough to make up

for the increased work burden (see e.g. Kabeer, 1999; Ochman & Ortega-Díaz, 2020; Cornwall, 2016).

4.2.2 Collective Agency and Transformative Action

What was particularly evident in the interviews and FGDs, were the bonds formed between the group members. All participants were able to share stories of their previous isolation and exclusion from their communities as a result of their widowhood, and a majority of the respondents noted the relations as being the most valuable resource they had received from the project. Many noted how they were stronger together, and how their new social network made them more confident and happy. The women specifically uplifted the ability to share stories, ideas, and problems as being particularly valuable, as they now felt that they had a network to rely on would they need it, simultaneously as the possibility to help others made them feel more self-confident in their capabilities as well. The participants, therefore, seemed to possess the ‘sense of agency’ that Kabeer (1999:438) describes, as they expressed hope, purpose, and motivation regarding their future.

A clear example of collective agency arose as the group started noticing growing participation in the market as new producers of soap had arrived in the same area, which made many of the newer recruits struggle with their sales. This was particularly challenging for those who were new to the project, which made some of them struggle to gain profits. As a result, the group decided to increase the collective responsibility of their sales, making sure to assist the participants who struggled with selling by helping them find new customers and coming up with collective marketing ideas.

The group also showed abilities to form collective plans for the future, in the sense that Kabeer describes (1999: 445). Following the issues of increased competition, the participants stated that they had realized the need to diversify their business, and therefore initiated a plan to save up for a new soap machine that can produce bar soaps, in addition to their liquid soap, potentially providing them with a larger market. Further, the participants stated the fact that there are many other widows in Kibera in need of help and that they wish to grow the business so that it will be able to accommodate more people, contributing to wider empowerment in the area.

The participants also expressed some evidence of the transformative agency, which Kabeer argues necessitates the challenging of social norms and power dynamics (Kabeer,

1999: 451). Several of the participants noted how they had been able to challenge their own as well as the community's notions of widows and women. Previously believing that women, and particularly widowed women, had no place in business, the group members had been able to surprise both themselves and others in their community with the success of their business. One participant explained how the people of her village had treated her as 'worthless' after she had lost her husband, but expressed pride when stating that she had been able to prove them wrong by starting her own soap business.

One administrator stated that one of the main ambitions of the project was to change society's view on widowed women by increasing their representation within entrepreneurship and leadership. However, the success of this goal was difficult to evaluate due to the study's small scope. About half of the participants noted that they received improved treatment from the wider community after joining the project, while the other half of the participants had not noticed a significant change in others' treatment of them, yet still acknowledged that the relationships among the group members had a positive impact on their social status as they no longer felt as an outcast.

4.3 Achievements

When asked how they would define empowerment, the participants began by listing what Kabeer relates to as 'universally-valued functionings' (1999: 439), such as having proper food, shelter, and good health. The participants also noted the importance of education, highlighting the need of having enough money to pay for school fees for their children to complete school and possibly get a salaried job in the future. While the responses varied somewhat, a majority of the participants stated that the resources provided by the project had helped them achieve, or partially achieve, these goals, mainly through the extra income gained through the project, but also due to the acquired knowledge and skills which they had been able to utilize in their businesses to get a higher income.

The participants were also able to outline achievements that went beyond the basic needs of survival. Several of the participants have used the knowledge, skills, and capital from the project to either start or reinvest in their businesses, significantly contributing to their economic security. While the participants still live in poverty, many noted that this had improved their situation as they no longer struggled as much financially.

The interviews and FGD discussions also showcased how the group members visualized empowerment achievements beyond the material sphere, by highlighting the importance of relational, cognitive, and intellectual resources, and how these can be used to contribute to empowerment. Again, a majority of the participants noted that the project had helped contribute to these aspects of empowerment as well, particularly through the relations between the group members, which provided them with a new social network, helping them break isolation and gain support from each other. All interviewees also expressed how they had gained valuable knowledge and skills through the project.

Concerning the collective forms of empowerment, the interviews and FGDs provided evidence of the sort of ‘power with’ that Rowlands (1997) speaks about, with women coming together, breaking isolation, and increasing their agency and control over their lives. The data further demonstrated how the members were able to challenge doxa through their engagement in entrepreneurship and leadership since women typically don’t engage in these forms of businesses publicly in Kibera. This allows them to redefine and challenge assigned gender roles of women and widows, and, as one participant states, show that ‘widows are not worthless after the death of their spouse’ (Anna, 39, Kibera), but that they can be capable, productive, successful members of society.

Yet, aside from this, there was little evidence of the form of political, collective action which radically transforms power dynamics which Kabeer (1999:451) speaks about, and is again uplifted by Cornwall (2016) and Batliwala (1994: 129). While perhaps unrealistic to expect from a small empowerment project, and though expectations of activism could put an additional work burden onto the project participants, the widespread discrimination towards widowed women was evident throughout the study, particularly relating to their difficulties in finding proper housing, accessing banking services, seeking employment, as well as the common instances of SGBV. Though about half of the participants noted that they received improved treatment from the rest of the community, this seemed to be a result of their increased self-reliance, leading people to “no longer regard them as beggars” (Anna, 39, Kibera), rather than a widespread, improved view on widowhood and women.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings

The results showed a high degree of interconnectedness between the different types of resources, with many of the participants noting how access to one form of resource could help them access another one. A majority of the participants noted how the resources had a significant impact on their ability to make choices, as it had not only helped them financially, but also allowed them to gain new knowledge and skills, form a community, and critically reflect over their surroundings and capabilities.

When analyzing the agency of the participants, the study showed varying results between the newer and earlier recruits. While a minority of the participants had only been able to cover their basic needs with the resources from the projects, others had been able to utilize their agency to contribute to meaningful achievements which significantly changed their way of life. This was particularly the case with the women who had been able to utilize their network, skills and capital to start their own businesses. The study also showed some accounts of the resources contributing to efficient agency, where they could use the capital to make purchases to their homes which helped streamline their daily workload, yet not contributing to larger meaningful achievements.

The study was able to showcase a high degree of collective agency, as the group could make collective decisions and plans for the project. The participants reported a high degree of equality within the project. It was clear that the participants highly valued their relationships within the group, as it allowed them to break previous isolation. Further, some evidence of more transformative achievements was found, as the participants challenged both theirs and the communities gender norms and stigmatizations of women by publicly participating in entrepreneurship and leadership, The participants expressed pride in relation to this, as they were able to ‘prove others wrong’ and surprise themselves with their capability. The study also showed how the distribution of resources within the community was somewhat altered as a result of this, as the participants found that they had access to a wider variety of resources post joining the project.

The transformative impact was however limited, since the improved social status of the participants more so seemed to be a result of their own adaptation to the market rather than a change in societal attitudes towards widows and women.

5.2 Concluding Discussion: Lessons Learned and a Way Forward

Previous research has demonstrated the shortcomings of economic empowerment projects. Driven by neoliberal individualist and consumerist ideals, development projects have often taken advantage of women's gendered role as actors of reproduction by placing an additional work burden onto women, turning them into drivers of growth and efficiency (Cornwall, 2018; Rowlands, 1995; Ochman & Ortega-Díaz, 2020: 3). These empowerment projects have done little to address the underlying causes of gender inequities, perpetuated by neoliberal, androcentric ideals of individualism, competitiveness, and strong work ethics (Tickner, 1988: 10; Bergman-Rosamond et. al, 2020: 14; Federici, 2004: 11; Fraser, 2013: 3).

Yet, this study showcases how the researched economic empowerment project, despite certain shortcomings, has had a wide impact on the empowerment of a majority of the research participants, extending the realm of material and economic empowerment. Thus, this study provides an insight into how economic empowerment projects can contribute to other forms of empowerment as well. Further, since the current research field lacks research into empowerment projects which target the complex situation of widows, this study presents a learning opportunity that can, while in a modest way, inform future empowerment initiatives and research.

The project of this study differs from former mainstream economic empowerment projects in two main ways. Firstly, despite being an economic empowerment project, it possesses a holistic approach to empowerment, by including a high degree of consciousness-raising, education, training, and community building. Thus, it maintains the broad conceptualization of empowerment crucial to feminist empowerment theory, (Ochman & Ortega-Díaz, 2020:2), which has allowed the project to have a wider impact on the lives of the group members, as stated in the FGDs and individual interviews, even in the cases where the material resources only managed to cover basic needs of survival. This provides evidence that economic empowerment projects can provide a wider impact on women's empowerment, causing improvements in their social, relational, and psychological dimensions, when applying a broad conceptualization of empowerment and providing a variety of resources.

Secondly, the project has allowed its members to exercise a high degree of individual and collective agency over its development. From the initial decision to manufacture and sell soap to producing plans for how the business should grow in the future, the structure of the project has allowed its members a high degree of influence over its decision-making processes. This has provided the participants with a high level of equality and freedom, but

also responsibility. The participants have thus been able to gain experience in leadership and entrepreneurship, which has enabled the project to continue to grow, even after the host organizations transferred the responsibility of administering the project to its members.

Yet, generalizations based on this study should be made with caution. The study is small in its scope, and while providing an in-depth account of this particular project, the findings are influenced by their specific context. Further, the participants being widowed women provided for a specific set of circumstances, which may be hard to generalize to include married or younger women, where household dynamics may be of greater concern to women's ability to exercise agency and attain achievements. Power dynamics within the realm of the home has been a key concern in former studies on women's empowerment (see e.g. Kabeer, 2011; Merrifield, 2019), and might thus present another set of challenges for other empowerment projects.

Further, the project lacked elements of the political, collective action which many feminist scholars have called for (Sardenberg, 2008; Cornwall, 2018; Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 1999; Batliwala, 1994). The participants did testify to some degree of transformative achievements, as they were able to challenge societal as well as their own preconceived notions of gender ideals by partaking in entrepreneurship and leadership. About half of the group members also noted how they had experienced improved treatment from the community following their participation in the soap making and selling project. However, this more so seemed to be a result of their own increased self-reliance and financial stability, leading others to regard them as less of a burden. Thus, those who did experience improved treatment only did so after adapting to capitalist and individualist norms. This highlights the issues commonly uplifted by feminist critiques of empowerment projects, where it is more so women who adapt and change to fit the market and society, rather than the society and market adapting to accommodate vulnerable and marginalized people, as they are only respected, once they could provide for and support themselves through market initiatives (Cornwall, 2018). Thus, while the project does challenge some gender norms it's still in conformity with capitalist norms, and little is done to challenge the capitalist, individualist society that created the injustices and inequalities in the first place.

While it is perhaps unfair to expect more from a small empowerment project with limited resources, and while an expectation of activism could put an increased work burden on the participants, it is still necessary to widen the scope of analysis to address the underlying causes of inequalities. There is, for example, no political action aimed at challenging the discriminatory laws which privilege male inheritance rights at the cost of

women's, which sends many widows into poverty (Ude & Njoku, 2017: 1514). Though it can't be solely the responsibility of widows and administrators to push for political change within gender equity, future empowerment projects should consider including sensitivity training, community discussions, and continued consciousness raising to advocate for widows' rights in order to contribute to a wider impact of empowerment.

Lastly, future research should continue to analyze economic as well as other approaches to empowerment, to continue to inform existing literature and development actors on the perspectives of women. While this project has seemingly produced some positive results, Kenya is a large and diverse country where no one-size-fits-all approach to empowerment can be applied. New research initiatives should therefore continue to analyze and uplift the voices and experiences of women on the ground, providing for a more holistic and nuanced view of widow's empowerment. Furthermore, since the study showed that the project struggled with challenging wider power dynamics and gender norms in the community, future research should also analyze how NGO empowerment projects can produce a broader impact in society, for example by including men, married couples, and younger people in its study. Lastly, longer duration and follow-up studies could provide a better understanding of empowerment, as its process can occur gradually and slowly.

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7. Appendices

Appendix A: List of Interviewees

NEPHAK and WAY Empowerment Personnel²

Petra	WAY Project Administrator
Robert	NEPHAK Team Leader

Project Participants³

Anna
Josephine
Beatrice
Esther
Cornelia
Theresa
Layla
Duni
Maryann
Olivia
Wanja
Zahra
Amelia
Charlotte
Rose
Elinah
Wanja
Monica

² All names are pseudonyms

³ All names are pseudonyms

Ruth
Elizabeth

Appendix B: Interview Guides

Project Administrators

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and how you became involved in this project?
2. Could you tell me about the soap making and selling project? What was the initial process like and what inspired you to start/join it?
3. Could you tell me about the project's organization?
4. Could you tell me about the participants and their situations?
5. What are the main ambitions and goals of the project?
6. How do you seek to empower the participants in the project?
7. What, in your opinion, have been your biggest achievements?
8. What, in your opinion, have been the biggest challenges to the project?
9. What has the general response been to the program? From the participants? From the community?
10. Have you noticed a larger impact in the community?
11. In your opinion, what could be improved about the project?

Project Participants

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and how you became involved in soap making and selling?
2. Why did you choose to join the soap making and selling project?
3. Can you tell me about your experience with soap making and selling?
4. Could you tell me what empowerment means to you?
5. How has being a widow affected your daily life and your ability to provide for yourself and your family?
6. How has soap making and selling impacted your financial situation and independence?

7. Has the soap making and selling project helped to empower you and other women in your community?
8. Are there any challenges or difficulties you have faced while participating in this project?
9. How has your involvement in this project affected your social status and relationships within your community? Have you noticed any changes in the support from your community?
10. What kind of support, if any, do you feel is necessary to help widows in Kibera achieve economic empowerment and a better quality of life?
11. How can the wider community and society as a whole support widows in Kenya in achieving economic empowerment and a better quality of life?
12. Do you have any suggestions or recommendations for how this project could be improved or expanded?