



# The Role of Universities in Women's Socioeconomic Empowerment: A Qualitative Study

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Women's empowerment is a vital component of societal progress and sustainable development, with far-reaching implications for gender equality and inclusive growth. Historically, women have been confined to supporting roles in many African and Malawian societies, limiting their active contribution to societal development. In light of this, the study examines the role of universities in fostering women's socioeconomic empowerment.

**Methods:** The study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilizing face-to-face, in-depth interviews. The study was undertaken at the University of Livingstonia, Ekwendeni Campus. Purposive sampling was used to select 20 participants, comprising university officials, faculty members, female students, and alumni. Thematic analysis was used for analyzing the data.

**Results:** The findings reveal that the University of Livingstonia significantly contributes to women's socioeconomic empowerment by providing loans, education, and knowledge to the wider community. This facilitates community self-reliance through the establishment of businesses and the active participation of women in educational activities and community engagements.

**Conclusion:** The study underscores the importance of universities in fostering women's socioeconomic empowerment. It emphasizes the need for comprehensive strategies to overcome challenges and enhance the role of universities in promoting women's empowerment.

**Keywords:** Ekwendeni, Malawi, qualitative study, socioeconomic empowerment, universities, women empowerment

## Introduction

Women's empowerment has significant implications for gender equality and inclusive growth and is a crucial component of societal progress and sustainable development. Kabeer (1999) defines women's empowerment as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability." It is an essential part of social and economic development because it improves not only the lives of individual women but also those of entire communities and countries (Rehman et al., 2015). However, historically, women have been restricted to supporting roles (Eissler et al., 2022) in many African and Malawian societies, which has reduced their ability to actively contribute to societal development. Nevertheless, concerted efforts have been made through various policies and programs to address these challenges and advance the social and economic standing of women.

The concept of women's empowerment has received a lot of attention recently (Desai et al., 2022), especially in developing nations where women have faced systemic barriers to accessing education (Jayachandran, 2021), financial resources (Ughetto et al., 2019), and decision-making opportunities. Promoting women's socioeconomic empowerment is crucial for fostering more resilient and equitable societies.

Universities play a special and crucial role in advancing women's empowerment as centers of learning, research, and knowledge dissemination (Panchani, 2017). Leveraging their diverse resources, expertise, and influential position in society, universities have the potential to actively contribute to the socioeconomic advancement of women and create an enabling environment for their growth. Although several studies have examined gender-related issues and initiatives within universities, a notable research gap exists, warranting a more thorough inquiry focusing specifically on the role of universities in promoting women's socioeconomic advancement.

This study aimed to address this research gap by examining the efforts of universities in fostering women's socioeconomic empowerment. Employing a qualitative research design, the study captured



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the experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by women within the university context. Additionally, it endeavored to identify the impact of university programs and policies on women's socioeconomic advancement and gender equality.

In addressing the complex realm of women's socioeconomic empowerment within the context of universities, this study adopts the theoretical underpinning of social capital theory. Defined by Bourdieu (1985, p. 248) as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition," social capital theory, which has its roots in sociology and economics, sheds light on the crucial role that social relationships, networks, and interactions play in creating resources, opportunities, and support for people and communities (Jha & Kelley, 2023). With the help of this theoretical framework, we can explore in greater detail how universities serve as essential channels for the creation and transfer of social capital, advancing women's socioeconomic status.

Social capital theory underscores the importance of both bonding and bridging social capital (Kopren & Westlund, 2021). Bonding social capital refers to "social ties that are fostered within communities and generate a 'strong in-group loyalty,' which frequently correlates with out-group aversion" (Putnam, 2000, p. 23). Bridging social capital, on the other hand, extends beyond immediate circles and facilitates interactions between diverse individuals and groups (Portes, 1998). In the context of this study, universities function as dynamic hubs where women engage in a range of social interactions, ranging from formal educational programs to informal networking events. These interactions not only strengthen bonding social capital among women but also foster bridging connections that expand their access to knowledge, resources, and opportunities.

## Methods

The study employed a qualitative research methodology to gain a better understanding of the role that the University of Livingstonia plays in promoting women's socioeconomic empowerment. Through purposive sampling, a diverse array of participants, including university officials, faculty members, female students, alumni, and representatives from women's empowerment organizations, were selected, ensuring a rich and varied perspective.

20 participants engaged in in-depth interviews where open-ended questions were thoughtfully employed to explore various dimensions of women's empowerment within the university. The research received ethical approval through the University of Livingstonia Undergraduate Research Evaluation Committee to ensure compliance with established ethical guidelines. Prior to participation, potential participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure confidentiality, the data was anonymized and stored securely. Participation was entirely voluntary.

Thematic analysis was the chosen methodology for analyzing data, facilitating the identification of recurring themes related to women's socioeconomic empowerment. The principle of data saturation guided both the data capture and analytical processes, ensuring a comprehensive and exhaustive examination of the subject matter.

## Results and Discussion

Empowering women is a fundamental aspect of community development and transformation (Al-Qahtani et al., 2021). This section presents the study's findings, organized thematically into significant areas, while discussing their implications and relevance to the University of Livingstonia's role in women's socioeconomic empowerment within the Ekwendeni locality.

### University Initiatives in Women's Social and Economic Empowerment

The participants associated women's empowerment with principles of gender equality, the creation of a conducive business environment, the promotion of women's leadership, and the provision of quality education. The university plays a pivotal role in facilitating women's access to education and financial assistance, both crucial factors for fostering women's empowerment. The respondents highlighted the importance of offering scholarships, grants, and loans specifically tailored for women, aiming to dismantle financial barriers and advance gender parity.

One participant, expressed in Tumbuka and translated to English, stated, "Here at the university, there is a chance to acquire loans, which can be a source of capital for businesses and help us women to be financially self-reliant."

Furthermore, the study revealed that the university can enhance women's empowerment through skill development opportunities, encompassing training, workshops, and mentoring programs. The acquisition of knowledge emerged as a significant asset for women's empowerment, with specific courses such as gender and development, as well as business planning and management, exemplifying educational avenues that empower women. As an illustration, respondent 8 mentioned, "for instance, the university offers specialized courses like gender and development and business planning and management, contributing to the social and economic empowerment of women."

These findings align with the assertion of Al-Qahtani et al. (2021) that education and gender equality are key determinants of women's empowerment. Universities can prioritize this by offering scholarships and grants specifically targeted at women. These initiatives would help reduce financial barriers and provide women with opportunities to pursue higher education. Additionally, increasing the enrollment of female students in universities is essential for ensuring equal representation and empowering women through education. By increasing access to education, universities can equip women with the necessary skills and knowledge to enhance their socioeconomic status and participate more actively in various spheres of life.

### Community Education Strategies for Women's Empowerment

The university employs a spectrum of strategies to educate communities on women's empowerment. Respondents emphasized the potency of door-to-door awareness campaigns, active community participation within university initiatives, and the facilitation of focused group discussions. Moreover, the utilization of media channels, such as radio and television, emerged as valuable platforms for disseminating information pertaining to women's empowerment.

An interviewee, Respondent 7, envisions an even more impactful approach: "While we observe university students educating local communities on various subjects, including women's issues—like

nursing students imparting health-related knowledge—a more potent method for disseminating women empowerment education could be adopted.”

Respondent 4 advocates for a mutually beneficial collaboration: “Universities possess the potential to bridge the gap by involving communities in certain educational programs, such as informative university meetings. This inclusive approach could enhance women’s access to education through active participation in such meetings.”

These strategies are in line with Mapuranga (2016), highlighting universities’ role in aiding policy formulation and development. Therefore, it is imperative for universities to ensure the availability and inclusivity of these policies, with dedicated efforts aimed at enhancing public awareness and comprehension. The study also emphasizes collaborative partnerships to amplify awareness, a concept aligned with social capital theory. Collaborative partnerships with external stakeholders, encompassing community organizations, government agencies, and businesses, emerge as pivotal mechanisms in the dissemination of policy-related information, effectively extending its reach to a broader audience. Such collaborative endeavors have the potential to fortify the impact of university initiatives and engender a more comprehensive and all-encompassing approach to the empowerment of women.

### **Challenges Impeding Women’s Socioeconomic Empowerment**

The study observes that there are several obstacles to women’s access to socioeconomic empowerment programs at universities. Notably, high illiteracy rates present a formidable barrier, with numerous women lacking essential information and comprehension of empowerment initiatives. Financial constraints further impede progress, particularly in the context of private universities with exorbitant fees. Male dominance prevailing in family and societal decision-making processes exacerbates the hindrance to women’s empowerment endeavors. Additionally, entrenched cultural norms and attitudes act as impediments, perpetuating misconceptions and resistance against women’s advancement.

Respondent 10 articulates a potential solution: “It can be easier if the universities and other organizations providing empowerment education utilize more accessible methods, such as village meetings and engaging mediums like drama and play, to convey the concept of women’s empowerment to illiterate individuals.”

Financial barriers are echoed by respondent 9, who underscores the prohibitive cost of education, particularly evident in institutions like the University of Livingstonia: “Universities are expensive for one to attend; substantial financial resources are a prerequisite due to the exorbitant fees. As a result, many women are unable to access these institutions, hindering their acquisition of valuable knowledge on women’s empowerment.”

Respondent 8 delves into the perceptions surrounding women’s empowerment: “Women empowerment programs are often viewed as catalysts for reshaping social structures, potentially unsettling traditional male dominance within societies.”

These challenges are consistent with Tabassum et al. (2019), who emphasized the intricate interplay of diverse factors in shaping women’s empowerment, encompassing geographical residence, educational attainment, media accessibility, marital status, socioeconomic standing, and organizational affiliations.

To overcome these challenges, universities must adopt a multifaceted approach. Alternative communication methods, such as drama and plays, can be employed to reach illiterate individuals and raise awareness about empowerment programs. Financial support and affordable educational opportunities should be made available to address financial constraints. Civic education initiatives can promote gender equality and encourage women’s active participation in decision-making processes, breaking down male dominance and cultural barriers.

### **Strategies for Enhancing Awareness and Engagement**

The study emphasized that the university’s policies and programs targeting women’s socioeconomic empowerment might not be widely recognized within local communities, potentially impeding their impact. Respondents suggested collaborative partnerships between universities and communities, proposing joint involvement in initiatives and local events to amplify awareness of empowerment policies. As respondent 18 aptly stated, “The communities and the universities should work hand in hand ... they can make people aware of their policies.” This highlights the importance of shared efforts in enhancing the visibility and understanding of empowerment initiatives, which also resonate with the concept of bridging social capital (Portes, 1998). Universities and communities can forge a potent synergy that improves the visibility and comprehension of empowerment policies by cooperating on shared projects.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations inherent in this study warrant acknowledgement. Firstly, the research was conducted within the specific context of the University of Livingstonia and the Ekwendeni locality, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader settings. Additionally, while efforts were made to ensure a diverse participant pool, the study’s focus on a single university may limit the representation of varying perspectives from different educational institutions. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the research, although valuable for capturing rich insights, might constrain the ability to quantify the extent of the identified effects. It is also worth noting that respondents’ views may be influenced by social desirability bias, potentially affecting the accuracy and depth of their responses. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the strategies and challenges associated with women’s socioeconomic empowerment, highlighting the important role universities can play in this process.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In this study, we have examined the University of Livingstonia’s role in advancing women’s socioeconomic empowerment in Ekwendeni, Malawi. The findings underscore the university’s significant contributions through financial aid, education, and knowledge dissemination. However, challenges such as illiteracy, financial constraints, male dominance, and cultural norms impede progress. Our proposed recommendations encompass enhanced education accessibility, effective awareness initiatives, barrier mitigation, and policy collaboration. By embracing these strategies, universities can emerge as key catalysts for gender equality and women’s empowerment, thereby fostering holistic societal development. The adoption of social capital theory as a guiding framework offers valuable insights into the intricate dynamics that underlie women’s empowerment within university contexts, emphasizing the pivotal role of social connections and cooperation.

**Ethics Committee Approval:** The study received ethical approval through the University of Livingstonia Undergraduate Research Evaluation Committee (Date: January 10, 2023, Protocol No: #22/12/004).

**Informed Consent:** Written informed consent was obtained from all participants who participated in this study.

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