

Title

**ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS IN
CHALLENGING GENDER INEQUALITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE CATHOLIC
COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE (CCJP) IN LIKUNI, LILONGWE, MALAWI**

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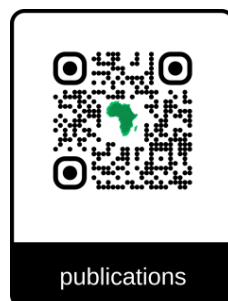
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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the effectiveness of women empowerment programs implemented by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) in challenging gender inequality in Likuni, Lilongwe, Malawi. The research examined the impact of these programs on women's participation in decision-making, awareness of rights, confidence, leadership abilities, socioeconomic status, and the sustainability of program outcomes. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 40 respondents—including women beneficiaries, CCJP staff, and community leaders—through questionnaires and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis.

The findings revealed that CCJP's initiatives significantly increased women's participation in community decision-making, enhanced their awareness of rights, and improved their socioeconomic status through skills training and access to financial resources. However, challenges such as cultural resistance, limited resources, inadequate stakeholder involvement, and insufficient follow-up support were identified as barriers to full effectiveness. The study concludes that while CCJP's programs have made meaningful contributions to women's empowerment, sustained impact requires stronger community sensitization, increased funding, enhanced stakeholder engagement, and consistent post-training support. Recommendations are provided for program improvement and future research.

Keywords: Women empowerment, gender inequality, Catholic Commission for

Justice and Peace (CCJP), Likuni, Malawi, program effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality remains a pervasive issue globally, particularly in developing countries like Malawi, where women face systemic barriers in education, economic participation, political representation, and decision-making. These barriers are reinforced by entrenched patriarchal norms, legal loopholes, and economic disenfranchisement. Empowerment programs have emerged as key interventions to address these disparities, aiming to enhance women's agency, autonomy, and socioeconomic standing. Such programs often integrate components of education, economic support, leadership development, and legal awareness to foster holistic advancement. This study focuses on the effectiveness of such programs implemented by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) in Likuni, Lilongwe, Malawi.

The central question guiding this research is: How effective are CCJP's women empowerment programs in challenging gender inequality at the community level? The study positions women's empowerment as a multidimensional process involving social, economic, and political dimensions, with gender inequality as the dependent variable influenced by program interventions. Specifically, the research examines the impact of CCJP's initiatives on women's participation in decision-making, awareness of rights, confidence, leadership abilities, socioeconomic status, and the sustainability of these outcomes.

Background of the Study

Gender inequality in Malawi is deeply

rooted in cultural norms, traditional practices, and structural inequities that limit women's opportunities and reinforce their subordinate status. Despite constitutional guarantees and policy frameworks promoting gender equality, implementation gaps persist, particularly at the community level. Women in Malawi continue to experience lower literacy rates, higher poverty levels, limited access to productive resources, and underrepresentation in governance structures. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), a faith-based organization, has been actively engaged in women's empowerment initiatives in Likuni, focusing on rights awareness, economic empowerment, leadership training, and community mobilization.

CCJP's programs are designed to address both immediate needs and structural barriers, aligning with national and international commitments to gender equality, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Malawi's Gender Equality Act. The organization employs a community-based approach, working closely with local structures to ensure relevance and ownership. However, the effectiveness of these programs in effecting tangible and sustainable change remains understudied. This research seeks to fill that gap by providing an evidence-based assessment of CCJP's interventions, examining not only outcomes but also the processes and challenges involved.

Problem Statement

While women empowerment programs like those implemented by CCJP are widely advocated, there is limited empirical evidence on their long-term impact and effectiveness in challenging deep-seated gender norms and inequalities. Existing evaluations often focus on short-

term outputs—such as the number of women trained or loans disbursed—rather than sustained changes in power dynamics, social norms, or economic independence. Moreover, there is a scarcity of studies that critically examine the contextual and operational challenges faced by faith-based organizations in implementing gender-transformative programs in conservative settings. This study addresses this gap by critically assessing the effectiveness of CCJP's programs in Likuni, exploring both achievements and limitations.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

General Objective

- To assess the effectiveness of women empowerment programs implemented by CCJP in challenging gender inequality in Likuni, Lilongwe.

Specific Objectives

- To assess the impact of CCJP's women empowerment programs on challenging gender inequality.
- To evaluate the extent to which CCJP's programs have improved women's socioeconomic status.
- To explore the sustainability of empowerment outcomes.
- To identify challenges faced in program implementation.
- To propose evidence-based recommendations for enhancing program effectiveness and sustainability.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to both academic and practical knowledge on women's empowerment and gender equality. Academically, it enriches the literature on faith-based interventions and community-driven development in Malawi. Practically, it provides insights for program designers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to enhance the effectiveness of empowerment interventions. By highlighting successes and challenges, the research offers evidence-based recommendations for strengthening CCJP's programs and similar initiatives in Malawi and beyond. It also informs policy dialogue on gender mainstreaming and the role of non-state actors in achieving SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Empowerment Theory and the Gender and Development (GAD) approach. Empowerment Theory, as articulated by *Rappaport (1987)* and *Zimmerman (2000)*, emphasizes processes through which individuals gain control over their lives, access resources, and participate in decision-making. Applied to women's empowerment, this theory highlights the importance of enhancing women's agency, confidence, and capacity to challenge restrictive norms. It further distinguishes between personal empowerment (self-efficacy, critical awareness) and relational empowerment (influence in relationships and community).

The Gender and Development approach shifts the focus from women as isolated beneficiaries to the broader social, economic, and institutional structures that perpetuate gender inequality. It

underscores the need for transformative interventions that address power dynamics and promote inclusive development. Additionally, Feminist Political Ecology offers a lens to understand how gender intersects with access to resources, space, and decision-making power in community settings—relevant to CCJP's work in peri-urban Likuni.

Empirical Evidence

- **Impact on Gender Inequality**

Studies show that empowerment programs can increase women's participation in decision-making, enhance awareness of rights, and reduce gender-based discrimination. *Kabeer (2005)* notes that empowerment involves expanding women's capacity to make strategic life choices, particularly in contexts where such agency has been denied. Programs that combine economic support with rights education and leadership training tend to be more effective in shifting gender norms. For instance, initiatives that include men and boys in gender sensitization have shown promising results in reducing resistance and fostering supportive environments.

- **Socioeconomic Improvement**

Economic empowerment is a key component of women's advancement. Programs offering skills training, microfinance, and entrepreneurial support have been linked to increased household income, financial independence, and improved living standards. However, sustainability depends on ongoing support, market access, and an enabling environment. Studies from Sub-Saharan Africa highlight that without access to markets, finance, and social networks,

economic gains may not be sustained.

- **Sustainability of Outcomes**

Long-term impact requires more than short-term interventions. Research indicates that programs integrating community engagement, stakeholder involvement, and follow-up support are more likely to sustain outcomes. Challenges such as cultural resistance, limited funding, and inadequate monitoring can undermine sustainability. The role of local institutions and leadership is critical in maintaining momentum beyond project cycles.

- **Implementation Challenges**

Common challenges include cultural and traditional barriers, limited resources, resistance from community leaders and men, and logistical constraints. Addressing these requires culturally sensitive approaches, strong community mobilization, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. Faith-based organizations like CCJP may face unique challenges in navigating religious teachings and cultural norms while promoting gender equality.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of program effectiveness. A case study design was used to focus on CCJP's interventions in Likuni, allowing for in-depth contextual analysis. The convergent parallel design

enabled the simultaneous collection and integration of both data types to validate and triangulate findings.

Study Setting and Population

The research was conducted in Likuni, a peri-urban area in Lilongwe District, Malawi, characterized by a mix of subsistence farming, small-scale trade, and growing urbanization. The target population included women beneficiaries of CCJP programs, CCJP staff, and community leaders. A total of 40 respondents participated in the study, comprising 25 women beneficiaries, 5 CCJP staff members, and 10 community leaders (including traditional authorities and local government representatives).

Sampling and Data Collection

Purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used to select participants. Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of key informants (staff and leaders), while random sampling was applied to women beneficiaries to enhance representativeness. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs). Questionnaires captured demographic information and quantitative data on program impact using Likert-scale items, while FGDs provided qualitative insights into experiences, perceptions, and challenges. Two FGDs were conducted, each with 8–10 women beneficiaries, facilitated in Chichewa to ensure comfort and clarity.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using

descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) in Microsoft Excel. Qualitative data were transcribed, translated, and analyzed thematically, identifying key patterns and narratives related to empowerment, challenges, and sustainability. Thematic analysis followed the steps of familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and protection from harm. Participants were assured of anonymity and their right to withdraw at any time. Ethical clearance was obtained from DMI-St. John the Baptist University, and permission was sought from CCJP and local authorities.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The majority of respondents were women (75%), aged 25–40 years, with varying levels of education (30% primary, 45% secondary, 25% none) and marital status (60% married, 25% single, 15% widowed). Most had been involved in CCJP programs for 1–3 years, providing a basis for assessing medium-term impact.

Impact on Gender Inequality

- **Increased Participation in Decision-Making:** 75% of respondents reported that CCJP programs had enhanced women's involvement in community decision-making, including in village development committees

and family matters.

- **Awareness of Rights:** 70% indicated improved awareness of women's rights, leading to greater confidence in challenging discriminatory practices such as property disinheritance and domestic violence.
- **Reduced Discrimination:** 63% observed a decrease in gender-based discrimination, though 19% felt that challenges remained, particularly in male-dominated spaces.
- **Enhanced Confidence and Leadership:** 72% noted improvements in women's confidence and leadership abilities, enabling them to take on more active roles in community affairs, including public speaking and group leadership.

Socioeconomic Improvement

- **Skills and Economic Independence:** 65% reported gaining new skills that contributed to economic independence, such as entrepreneurship, tailoring, agriculture, and financial management.
- **Access to Financial Resources:** 65% indicated improved access to financial resources through Village Savings and Loans (VSL) groups, though some faced barriers like limited capital, high interest rates, or lack of market access.
- **Household Income:** 70% reported an increase in household income due to participation in CCJP programs, with some women starting small businesses or improving agricultural yields.

- Overall Socioeconomic Status: 65% described significant improvements in their socioeconomic status, including better nutrition, school attendance for children, and increased respect within households.

Sustainability of Outcomes

- Continued Use of Skills: 75% of respondents continued to apply knowledge and skills gained from CCJP programs in their daily lives, indicating some level of behavioral change.
- Long-Term Changes: 75% agreed that the programs had brought lasting social and economic improvements, though 25% were uncertain or disagreed, highlighting the need for sustained support and reinforcement.
- Follow-Up and Support: 50% felt that CCJP provided adequate follow-up, while the other half reported gaps in post-training support, mentorship, and access to advanced training or markets.

Challenges in Implementation

- Limited Reach: 70% identified challenges in reaching all women in need, particularly those in remote or marginalized areas, due to logistical and financial constraints.
- Resource Constraints: 70% cited limited financial and material resources as a major barrier to program effectiveness, affecting training quality, outreach, and scalability.

- Stakeholder Engagement: 35% reported insufficient support from community leaders, men, and other stakeholders, though responses were mixed—some leaders were actively supportive, while others resisted change.
- Cultural Barriers: 75% highlighted cultural and traditional beliefs as significant obstacles to women's empowerment, including norms around female mobility, voice, and ownership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of CCJP's women empowerment programs:

- Strengthen Community Sensitization: Implement targeted awareness campaigns using participatory methods (theater, dialogues) to address cultural norms and promote gender equality, engaging men and community leaders as allies.
- Increase Funding and Resources: Mobilize additional resources through partnerships with government, NGOs, and donors to expand program reach, improve training materials, and ensure sustainable financing.
- Enhance Stakeholder Involvement: Foster greater collaboration with community leaders, men, religious institutions, and local government to build support, ensure inclusive implementation, and align with local development plans.
- Improve Follow-Up and Monitoring: Establish systematic follow-up mechanisms, including

mentorship programs, refresher trainings, and digital tools for tracking progress and addressing emerging challenges.

- **Expand Training and Capacity Building:** Offer continuous skills development in areas such as financial literacy, entrepreneurship, leadership, rights advocacy, and digital literacy to keep pace with changing economic opportunities.
- **Promote Women's Leadership:** Create platforms for women to exercise leadership in community decision-making, program planning, and advocacy, including linkages to local governance structures.
- **Conduct Longitudinal Studies:** Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track changes over time and measure the sustained impact of empowerment interventions.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that CCJP's women empowerment programs have made significant strides in challenging gender inequality and improving the socioeconomic status of women in Likuni. Participants reported increased participation in decision-making, greater awareness of rights, enhanced confidence, and improved economic independence. However, the full potential of these programs is constrained by cultural barriers, limited resources, inadequate stakeholder engagement, and gaps in follow-up support.

For empowerment initiatives to achieve lasting impact, they must be embedded in a holistic approach that addresses structural inequalities, fosters community

ownership, and ensures sustained support. CCJP's programs provide a valuable model, but continued adaptation and strengthening are essential to realize the vision of gender equality in Malawi and beyond. Empowerment is not an event but a process—one that requires patience, persistence, and partnership.

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