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THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIETAL VALUES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS IN TORORO DISTRICT

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Abstract

This study examined how societal values influence the implementation and outcomes of women's empowerment programs in Tororo District, Uganda, focusing on the ways socio-cultural norms shape women's participation, access to resources, and the overall effectiveness of NGO-led interventions. Using a descriptive correlational survey design and a mixed-methods approach, the study collected quantitative data through structured questionnaires and qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with women beneficiaries and key stakeholders drawn from World Vision Tororo and Caritas Tororo, alongside district and community-level actors. Quantitative results showed broad agreement that cultural beliefs and traditional gender roles significantly affect women's participation and limit the impact of empowerment initiatives, while community leaders strongly shape local perceptions of women's empowerment and societal resistance constrains program delivery and women's access to key resources. Pearson correlation analysis indicated a moderate positive and statistically significant relationship between societal values and women's empowerment outcomes ($r=0.469$, $p<0.01$), confirming that socio-cultural norms are meaningfully associated with program effectiveness. Qualitative findings reinforced that entrenched gender expectations can restrict women's mobility, leadership, and economic agency, but also showed that culturally sensitive strategies, such as engaging elders, religious leaders, men, and local opinion leaders, and promoting positive female role models, can gradually shift attitudes and strengthen program legitimacy and sustainability. The study concludes that women's empowerment programs are most effective when they address societal values directly through sustained norm-responsive and gender-transformative approaches, alongside technical and economic support interventions.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, Gender norms, NGO programs, Community perceptions, Tororo District

Introduction

Women's empowerment has become a central priority in global development discourse because it is linked to rights realization, human development, and inclusive growth (UNDP, 2023; UBOS, 2024). Yet, contemporary scholarship and policy practice increasingly recognize that empowerment is not produced by program inputs alone, such as credit, training, or group formation, but by women's ability to convert those inputs into choices and outcomes in contexts shaped by unequal power relations (UNDP, 2023; Sedlander et al., 2024). In Uganda, this conversion is frequently mediated by societal values, shared norms, beliefs, and expectations about gender roles and authority, that define what women are permitted to do, where they may go, what they may own, and whose voice matters in household and community decisions (UNDP, 2023; Torsu, 2024; Razavi et al., 2020). Accordingly, understanding the influence of societal values on women's empowerment programs in

Tororo District requires moving beyond celebratory narratives of “participation” and interrogating how informal institutions sustain or disrupt women’s agency, even when policies appear supportive (UNDP, 2023; Sedlander et al., 2024).

In Uganda, policy frameworks acknowledge that patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes remain deeply embedded, shaping unequal power relations in private and public life and limiting women’s substantive enjoyment of rights (UNDP, 2023). These societal values operate through multiple mechanisms, including cultural expectations around male household authority, social norms that assign unpaid domestic and care work primarily to women, and customary systems that often privilege men’s control over productive resources such as land (UNDP, 2023; Kavuma & Ayesigwa, 2024). Such dynamics matter because empowerment programs often assume that women can attend trainings, travel to markets, lead groups, or control income once opportunities exist, yet normative environments may restrict mobility, time use, and decision-making autonomy (UNDP, 2023; EPRC, 2025). Tororo District is therefore not merely a geographic setting for empowerment programming; it is a normative arena where gender expectations can translate into women’s inclusion, exclusion, or conditional participation (Razavi et al., 2020; UNDP, 2023).

Recent national evidence indicates that Ugandan women still face strong barriers to equality that align with the argument that societal values can override formal opportunities. Afrobarometer reports that more than one-third of respondents say husbands or other family members *often* or *always* prevent women from taking paid employment, demonstrating how household gatekeeping can directly constrain women’s economic agency (Torsu, 2024). Afrobarometer also documents persistent gender gaps in education progression and employment participation, which can weaken women’s baseline capabilities for leveraging empowerment interventions (Torsu, 2024). These findings suggest that empowerment programs that prioritize economic participation, such as entrepreneurship support or livelihood enhancement, may produce limited or uneven gains if women cannot independently decide to work, control earnings, or sustain engagement in program activities (Torsu, 2024; UNDP, 2023).

A particularly powerful pathway through which societal values shape empowerment is unpaid care and domestic work, which is socially assigned and unevenly distributed. UNDP’s Uganda strategy identifies unpaid care burdens as part of structural gender inequality that constrains women’s time and mobility (UNDP, 2023). Evidence-based Ugandan policy analysis further emphasizes that unpaid care work is entrenched in societal expectations and restricts women’s ability to engage in formal employment, entrepreneurship, skills development, and public participation (Kavuma & Ayesigwa, 2024). Quantitative policy evidence also indicates substantial weekly time burdens for women related to caregiving and unpaid work, with implications for women’s labor-market entry, retention, and advancement (EPRC, 2025). In empowerment programming, these constraints have practical implications for attendance consistency, leadership participation, uptake of market opportunities, and program completion, particularly for women who lack supportive household arrangements or childcare alternatives (Kavuma & Ayesigwa, 2024; EPRC, 2025; UNDP, 2023). In this respect, societal values can function as “hidden eligibility criteria,” where only women with supportive households or fewer care burdens can fully participate and benefit (Kavuma & Ayesigwa, 2024; UNDP, 2023).

Peer-reviewed scholarship strengthens the case for treating gender norms as measurable social forces rather than abstract cultural background. Sedlander et al. (2024), in validating a gender norms scale in Uganda, demonstrate that norms operate through both descriptive norms (what people do) and injunctive norms (what people believe should be done), reinforcing that women’s choices are

shaped by perceived community expectations and potential sanctions (Sedlander et al., 2024). Their findings further associate more equitable injunctive norms with lower odds of partner-dominated reproductive decision-making, illustrating how normative climates can shape bargaining power and control within intimate relationships (Sedlander et al., 2024). Although this evidence is drawn from reproductive decision-making, its analytical implication is broader for empowerment: program resources may not translate into agency where women's decisions remain socially constrained by partner authority, kinship expectations, and community surveillance (Sedlander et al., 2024; UNDP, 2023). Therefore, empowerment programs in Tororo District must be interpreted within the normative structures that regulate women's "permission to participate," not only their capacity to participate (UNDP, 2023; Torsu, 2024).

Tororo-specific evidence underscores that women's participation in local decision-making forums, relevant to many empowerment interventions, can be constrained by sociocultural and procedural barriers. Razavi et al. (2020) shows that vulnerable women in Tororo express a desire to participate in decentralized priority-setting processes, but face barriers that limit meaningful engagement, including informational gaps and sociocultural constraints embedded within participation structures (Razavi et al., 2020). This matters because many women's empowerment programs rely on participatory models (e.g., community dialogues, group governance, beneficiary committees, and local planning spaces) where women's voice is necessary for accountability and relevance (Razavi et al., 2020; UNDP, 2023). If societal values normalize women's silence in mixed settings or treat leadership as masculine, women's inclusion may become symbolic, attendance without influence, thereby weakening empowerment outcomes even when programs report "participation" (Razavi et al., 2020; Sedlander et al., 2024). The Tororo context therefore highlights the importance of evaluating empowerment programs not only by outputs (numbers trained or funded) but by whether women gain substantive voice, control, and recognition within the spaces that shape program decisions and community development priorities (Razavi et al., 2020; UNDP, 2023).

Women's empowerment is also inseparable from control over productive resources, particularly land in agrarian and peri-agrarian settings. Contemporary Ugandan analyses repeatedly note that women's land rights remain constrained by the dual legal system and by patriarchal customary practices that can dominate implementation even when statutory protections exist (Tsao, 2024). Evidence from the International Land Coalition indicates that only a small proportion of land is registered in women's names and that entrenched gender norms sustain men's dominance as landowners and decision-makers, reinforcing the gap between legal provisions and lived realities (Tsao, 2024). Because land ownership and control can influence women's bargaining power, credit access, livelihood security, and status within families and communities, empowerment programs that aim at economic independence may be structurally constrained when women remain resource-insecure under customary norms (Tsao, 2024; UNDP, 2023). In Tororo District, where many livelihoods are tied to land and local markets, the normative regulation of women's property rights can therefore directly influence the sustainability of empowerment gains (Tsao, 2024; UNDP, 2023).

At the program level, Uganda's policy environment includes government-led initiatives such as the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP), which aims to increase household income and empower women through economic participation (Kaliro District Local Government, 2020). However, evidence and critique in the wider empowerment field caution that entrepreneurship and livelihood programs can be undermined when normative constraints persist, such as women's limited control over profits, constrained mobility, unequal domestic workloads, and restricted decision-making power (Torsu, 2024; Kavuma & Ayesigwa, 2024; UNDP, 2023). Moreover,

empowerment programs can sometimes produce unintended consequences, including domestic tension or backlash, when shifts in women's economic roles are perceived as threatening established gender hierarchies (UNDP, 2023; Sedlander et al., 2024). This highlights the need for context-sensitive programming that incorporates norm-aware strategies, including community engagement and safeguarding approaches, rather than assuming that economic inputs alone generate empowerment (UNDP, 2023; Sedlander et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, the present manuscript, *the influence of societal values on women's empowerment programs in Tororo District*, examines how local norms and social expectations shape program uptake, participation quality, retention, and outcomes. The manuscript proceeds from the position that empowerment is multidimensional and relational, and that societal values can either enable change (through social legitimacy, solidarity, and supportive role expectations) or constrain it (through gatekeeping, stigma, and control over women's labor, mobility, and resources) (UNDP, 2023; Sedlander et al., 2024). By building on verified empirical evidence on Uganda's gender constraints, Tororo participation dynamics, unpaid care burdens, and norm measurement, the study aims to generate practical and scholarly insights for designing empowerment interventions that are both effective and socially grounded (Razavi et al., 2020; EPRC, 2025; Kavuma & Ayesigwa, 2024; Torsu, 2024; UNDP, 2023).

Literature Review

Women's empowerment programs are increasingly analyzed as interventions that operate not only through resources (skills, credit, services) but also through the normative environments that shape women's agency and the social legitimacy of program participation (UNDP, 2023; Sedlander et al., 2024). In Uganda, empowerment outcomes are often mediated by societal values, shared expectations regarding gender roles, authority, and acceptable behavior, because these values influence women's mobility, voice, time use, and control over assets even when programs are well designed (UNDP, 2023; Torsu, 2024; Tsao, 2024). These insights imply that the "success" of empowerment initiatives should be interpreted as a negotiated process rather than a direct effect of program inputs, given that informal institutions can enable, dilute, or reverse program gains (UNDP, 2023; GOAL Uganda, 2025). In contexts such as Tororo District, where customary practices and community power relations remain salient, societal values are therefore central to explaining variation in program uptake, retention, and outcomes across communities and groups of women (Razavi et al., 2020; UNDP, 2023).

A dominant strand in the literature highlights patriarchal norms as a persistent barrier to empowerment, especially where male authority is socially normalized in household decision-making, resource control, and community leadership (UNDP, 2023; Torsu, 2024). Afrobarometer evidence indicates the continuing strength of household gatekeeping, with more than one-third of respondents reporting that husbands or other family members often or always prevent women from taking paid employment, demonstrating how family-level control can constrain women's economic autonomy and participation in livelihood initiatives (Torsu, 2024). Such findings reinforce the argument that empowerment programs that target women's entrepreneurship, employment, or financial inclusion may face limited effects if women remain unable to independently decide on work participation, market engagement, or control over income (Torsu, 2024; UNDP, 2023). Relatedly, public-opinion evidence shows that ambivalence regarding women's equality in leadership and employment persists, indicating that normative support for gender equality may be uneven and contested, with implications for program acceptance and community endorsement (Ssebunya, 2024; Torsu, 2024). These dynamics caution against evaluating empowerment mainly through enrollment

or training completion, because women may “participate” but remain normatively constrained from converting program benefits into substantive power (UNDP, 2023; GOAL Uganda, 2025).

Evidence from Tororo District itself underscores that social norms shape women’s participation not only in economic activities but also in local decision-making spaces that are often core channels for empowerment programming. Razavi et al. (2020) show that vulnerable women in Tororo expressed a desire to participate in decentralized priority-setting processes, yet they faced sociocultural and procedural barriers that limited meaningful engagement (Razavi et al., 2020). This supports a broader critique in gender and governance scholarship that participation can be nominal, presence without influence, when norms regulate who speaks, whose knowledge counts, and who is considered legitimate in public deliberation (Razavi et al., 2020; UNDP, 2023). Consequently, empowerment programs that rely on committees, community meetings, or beneficiary selection forums must consider how power and norms operate within these structures, otherwise programs risk reproducing exclusion in the very spaces designed to promote inclusion (Razavi et al., 2020; UNDP, 2023).

Another widely documented mechanism through which societal values constrain empowerment is the normative allocation of unpaid care and domestic work to women. Uganda’s gender equality strategy explicitly highlights that unequal care responsibilities and gender stereotyping remain structural barriers, constraining women’s time, mobility, and labor-market engagement (UNDP, 2023). Care-burden research in Uganda further argues that unpaid care work, rooted in societal expectations, reduces women’s participation in paid work and enterprise, and limits their sustained engagement in training, markets, and group-based program activities (Kavuma & Ayesigwa, 2024; EPRC, 2025). These findings imply that empowerment programs may unintentionally privilege women with fewer domestic responsibilities while excluding those with heavier care burdens, thereby reproducing inequality within target populations (Kavuma & Ayesigwa, 2024; UNDP, 2023). Gender and social inclusion field evidence from Uganda likewise identifies time poverty and domestic workload as recurring constraints on women’s participation in project activities, reinforcing the need for care-sensitive program designs such as childcare support, scheduling flexibility, and household-level workload redistribution strategies (GOAL Uganda, 2025; Kavuma & Ayesigwa, 2024; UNDP, 2023).

Recent peer-reviewed scholarship provides a conceptual and measurement basis for interpreting these constraints as norm-driven rather than merely individual or logistical. Sedlander et al. (2024) demonstrate in Uganda that gender norms operate through injunctive norms (perceived expectations) and descriptive norms (perceived practices), and that normative climates are associated with women’s decision-making dynamics within intimate relationships (Sedlander et al., 2024). Although the study focuses on reproductive decision-making, its implication for empowerment programs is direct: when women anticipate sanctions, disapproval, or conflict, they may avoid participation, limit aspiration, or cede control over benefits even when program resources are available (Sedlander et al., 2024; UNDP, 2023). This norm-sensitivity also supports critical perspectives that empowerment initiatives can produce backlash, social, relational, or violent, when women’s gains are perceived as destabilizing established gender hierarchies, especially where community engagement and safeguarding are weak (UNDP, 2023; Spotlight Initiative, 2024). Uganda’s Spotlight Initiative reporting situates harmful norms and violence against women and girls as persistent risks that require coordinated prevention and response, indicating that empowerment programming must integrate protection and norm-change strategies rather than assuming linear

progress from economic inputs to empowerment outcomes (Spotlight Initiative, 2024; Spotlight 2.0 Joint Programme, 2024).

The literature also emphasizes that empowerment is constrained when women lack secure control over productive assets, especially land, in agrarian economies. Contemporary analyses of women's land rights in Uganda show that legal equality does not necessarily translate into effective ownership and control due to customary practices, social norms, and institutional barriers in land administration and registration (Tsao, 2024; UNDP, 2023). This matters for empowerment programs because land security influences women's livelihood options, bargaining power, credit access, and resilience, key factors for sustaining economic empowerment outcomes beyond short project cycles (Tsao, 2024; UNDP, 2023). In settings where land governance is normatively gendered, programs promoting agriculture, enterprise, or savings may be limited by structural constraints that women cannot overcome without broader institutional and normative change (Tsao, 2024; UNDP, 2023).

At the same time, the literature cautions against treating "culture" or societal values as uniformly oppressive or static. Policy and program evidence indicates that norms are dynamic and can be influenced through stakeholder engagement, coalition building, and narrative change strategies that increase the social legitimacy of women's participation (UNDP, 2023; GOAL Uganda, 2025). Interventions that incorporate men as allies, engage religious and cultural leaders, and foster community dialogue are often presented as more effective in reducing resistance and building shared responsibility for gender equality (UNDP, 2023; GOAL Uganda, 2025). Public-opinion evidence also suggests that attitudes toward gender equality can be mixed and context-dependent, implying that programs may find "normative openings" to expand acceptance of women's leadership and economic roles if interventions are carefully framed and locally anchored (Ssebunya, 2024; UNDP, 2023). These insights align with the argument that empowerment programs should be evaluated not only on individual-level outcomes but also on whether they shift collective expectations, participation rules, and community narratives that determine the durability of women's gains (Sedlander et al., 2024; UNDP, 2023).

Overall, the literature indicates that women's empowerment programs in Tororo District are likely to succeed when they (a) recognize patriarchal gatekeeping and address household bargaining constraints, (b) integrate care-sensitive strategies that respond to norm-driven time poverty, (c) strengthen women's substantive participation in decision-making spaces, (d) mitigate backlash risks through safeguarding and community engagement, and (e) confront structural barriers such as gendered land governance that limit economic agency (Razavi et al., 2020; Kavuma & Ayesigwa, 2024; Tsao, 2024; Spotlight Initiative, 2024; UNDP, 2023; GOAL Uganda, 2025; Sedlander et al., 2024; Torsu, 2024; EPRC, 2025).

Methodology

Design of the Study

This study employed a descriptive correlational survey design to examine the influence of societal values on women's empowerment programs in Tororo District. The design was appropriate for describing existing conditions without manipulating variables, while enabling systematic examination of relationships among the study variables (Kombo & Tromp, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A mixed-methods approach was used to strengthen the credibility of findings by integrating quantitative measurement of societal values and women's empowerment outcomes with qualitative insights from key informants involved in women's empowerment programming (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data captured patterns and levels of perceived societal values (e.g., gender

norms, stigma, customary expectations, and religious/community prescriptions) and empowerment outcomes, while qualitative data provided explanatory depth regarding how socio-cultural expectations shape women's participation and benefit in the local context (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Population and Sample Size

The study targeted women beneficiaries of NGO women's empowerment programs and institutional actors involved in implementing these initiatives in Tororo District. The accessible population comprised 313 individuals drawn from World Vision Tororo and Caritas Tororo, including NGO staff, Community Development Officers (CDOs), sub-county chiefs, local leaders and trainers of trainees, as well as women beneficiaries and selected community members engaged in or affected by the programs.

Using Slovin's formula at a 5% margin of error, a minimum sample of 155 respondents was derived from the probabilistically sampled group of 253 beneficiaries and community members. In addition, a purposive census of 60 key informants (NGO staff and district/community-level actors) was included because of their specialized roles and direct knowledge of women's empowerment programming and the socio-cultural environment influencing it. The final study sample therefore comprised 215 respondents (155 beneficiaries/community members + 60 key informants).

Table 1: Target population and sample size of respondents

Category of respondents	Population (N)	Sample (n)	Sampling technique
World Vision staff	6	6	Purposive
Caritas staff	6	6	Purposive
CDOs & sub-county chiefs	8	8	Purposive
Local leaders & trainers of trainees	40	40	Purposive
Beneficiaries & general community members	253	155	Simple random sampling
Total	313	215	

Data Collection Procedure and Tools

Both probability and non-probability sampling techniques were employed. Simple random sampling was used to select the 155 beneficiaries and community respondents from an NGO-generated sampling frame, enhancing representativeness and minimizing selection bias (Saunders et al., 2016). Purposive sampling was used to select NGO staff and other key informants (n = 60) based on their roles in program oversight, community mobilization, implementation, and their experiential knowledge of prevailing societal values and how these affect women's participation and program outcomes.

Data collection tools included structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire captured respondents' demographic characteristics and contained Likert-type items measuring societal values (e.g., perceived gender-role expectations, normative acceptance of women's leadership, stigma toward women's economic activity, restrictions on women's mobility, and community/religious expectations) and women's empowerment outcomes (e.g., economic autonomy, access to resources, participation in household/community decisions, self-efficacy, and engagement in leadership/community forums). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected NGO leaders and key stakeholders to explore socio-cultural influences, program

implementation dynamics, and contextual constraints (including gender norms and community expectations) that shape women's empowerment programs in Tororo District.

Validation

Content validity was ensured through expert review of the instruments to assess clarity, relevance, and conceptual coverage of the constructs "societal values" and "women's empowerment" (Kothari, 2008). A Content Validity Index (CVI) was computed, and items that did not meet acceptable relevance thresholds were revised or removed. Reliability was assessed through a pilot study with a small group of respondents drawn from a comparable setting. After refinement, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for the societal values and women's empowerment scales, and values of 0.70 and above were considered satisfactory for internal consistency. Items that weakened reliability were adjusted to improve scale coherence.

Data Analysis

Data were checked for completeness, coded, and entered into SPSS for analysis (Zikmund et al., 2012). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarize respondent characteristics and patterns in societal values and empowerment indicators. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between societal values and women's empowerment program outcomes. Where relevant, simple linear regression was used to estimate the proportion of variance in women's empowerment outcomes explained by societal values indicators.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step procedure: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition/naming, and reporting. Qualitative themes were used to enrich interpretation of the quantitative results by explaining how and why particular societal values were perceived to enable or constrain women's empowerment. All participants were assigned alphanumeric codes to ensure confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and an introductory letter were obtained from Kampala International University prior to data collection. Permission was then sought from relevant district authorities, NGO leadership, and community gatekeepers. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained after explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Confidentiality was assured through coded identification, omission of names from research instruments and transcripts, and secure storage of data in password-protected digital files and locked physical storage.

Question wording and interview procedures were designed to minimize discomfort and avoid judgement, especially where participants discussed sensitive gender norms, stigma, household constraints, or community beliefs. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and findings were reported at aggregate level only. All scholarly sources informing the methodology (Kombo & Tromp, 2009; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Kothari, 2008; Zikmund et al., 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saunders et al., 2016) were acknowledged in line with academic integrity.

Results

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

The study analysed the influence of societal values on women's empowerment programs in Tororo District. This section presents the descriptive statistical analysis of women beneficiaries' perceptions

regarding how societal values and norms affect the implementation and outcomes of women's empowerment initiatives. Responses to eight Likert-scale items were analyzed using frequency distributions, percentage distributions, mean scores, and standard deviations. The table below provides a summary of these descriptive statistics, offering insights into how cultural beliefs, traditional roles, and community perceptions influence the reach and effectiveness of NGO-led women's empowerment programs in the district.

Responses were analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Societal Values and Women's Empowerment (n = 130)

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Valid N	Mean	Std. Dev
1. Cultural beliefs affect women's participation in NGO programs.	41 (33.1%)	47 (38.0%)	18 (14.6%)	12 (9.7%)	6 (4.6%)	124	3.86	1.12
2. Traditional gender roles limit the impact of women's initiatives.	38 (30.6%)	49 (39.5%)	16 (12.9%)	14 (11.3%)	7 (5.6%)	124	3.78	1.17
3. NGOs address negative societal attitudes towards empowered women.	35 (28.0%)	46 (36.8%)	19 (15.2%)	16 (12.8%)	9 (7.2%)	125	3.65	1.20
4. Community leaders influence perceptions of women's empowerment.	39 (31.5%)	45 (36.3%)	20 (16.1%)	13 (10.5%)	7 (5.6%)	124	3.78	1.15
5. Resistance from society affects program delivery to women.	36 (29.3%)	44 (35.8%)	21 (17.1%)	15 (12.2%)	6 (4.9%)	122	3.73	1.16
6. NGOs promote values that support gender equality.	37 (30.3%)	48 (39.3%)	19 (15.6%)	13 (10.7%)	5 (4.1%)	122	3.81	1.13
7. Societal norms sometimes hinder women's access to resources.	40 (32.0%)	42 (33.6%)	22 (17.6%)	13 (10.4%)	8 (6.4%)	125	3.74	1.20
8. Changing community perceptions improves women's empowerment.	42 (33.6%)	43 (34.4%)	18 (14.4%)	12 (9.6%)	10 (8.0%)	125	3.76	1.23

Source: Primary Data (2025)

Across items, respondents consistently affirmed that socio-cultural factors shape women's participation and outcomes in NGO programmes. Majorities agreed that cultural beliefs and rigid gender roles constrain women's engagement (means 3.863.86 and 3.783.78), often creating social pressure that leads to limited or withdrawn participation and weakens women-led initiatives.

Respondents also recognized that communities are not neutral implementation spaces: leaders strongly influence empowerment narratives (mean 3.783.78), while broader societal resistance remains a practical barrier to programme delivery (mean 3.733.73) and to women's access to resources such as land, credit, and opportunities (mean 3.743.74).

At the same time, NGOs are perceived as promoting gender-equitable values (mean 3.813.81) and, to a moderate extent, challenging negative attitudes toward empowered women (mean 3.653.65),

though mixed responses suggest uneven visibility or effectiveness across locations. Overall, respondents strongly believed that shifting community perceptions is crucial for sustainable empowerment gains (mean 3.763.76), implying that normative change efforts should accompany service provision.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

To investigate the influence of societal values on women’s empowerment programs in Tororo District, a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was computed using SPSS Version 26. This analysis tested the null hypothesis (H_{03}) which stated that societal values have no significant influence on women’s empowerment programs.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation between Societal Values and Women’s Empowerment

	Societal Values	Women’s Empowerment
Societal Values	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	124
Women’s Empowerment	Pearson Correlation	.469**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	124

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Based on 130 questionnaires returned; analysis used valid paired responses (n = 124)

Interpretation

The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = .469$) indicates a moderate positive relationship between societal values and women’s empowerment, with a p-value of .000, which is below the conventional significance threshold of 0.01. This suggests that the relationship is statistically significant, and the likelihood that this correlation is due to chance is minimal.

This finding implies that societal values, including cultural beliefs, traditional gender roles, community perceptions, and support or resistance from community leaders, play a significant role in shaping the effectiveness of women’s empowerment programs. Positive shifts in community attitudes and norms are associated with improved participation, access to resources, and overall empowerment of women.

Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{03} : Societal values have no significant influence on women’s empowerment programs) is rejected. The results underscore the importance of addressing societal and cultural factors when designing and implementing women’s empowerment initiatives in Tororo District.

To complement quantitative findings, qualitative data were obtained from interviews with 46 key informants, including NGO staff, community development officers, sub-county chiefs, local leaders, and trainers of trainees, participating in women’s empowerment programs in Tororo District. Ethical considerations (Section 3.8) were observed by anonymizing respondents using coded identifiers (A-D). In line with the third objective, insights from fifteen purposively selected respondents (A09-D09) offered rich perspectives on how cultural beliefs, gender roles, and community attitudes influence the design, implementation, and success of NGO-led empowerment interventions.

Respondent A09 responded,
“In Tororo, deep-rooted cultural beliefs about women’s roles heavily influence their participation in our programs. Many communities still expect women to focus on household

duties, which limits the time and freedom they have to attend trainings or participate in economic activities. We have had to engage elders and cultural leaders to sensitize them on the benefits of women's empowerment for the entire community."

This means that entrenched cultural norms remain a significant barrier, requiring strategic community engagement and awareness to create an enabling environment for women's empowerment.

On the other hand, respondent B09 argued,

"Traditional gender roles often restrict women from taking leadership positions within their communities. Despite their skills and interest, women face resistance when trying to lead savings groups or community projects. Our programs include components to challenge these roles, but change is gradual and requires persistent effort."

This implies that gender stereotypes are pervasive and directly limit women's opportunities for socio-economic advancement, necessitating continuous gender-transformative approaches.

As if that is not enough, respondent D09 contended,

"Societal values also impact how communities perceive empowered women. In some cases, women who become economically independent or outspoken are labeled as arrogant or disrespectful. This stigma discourages participation and sometimes leads to social isolation. Our programs include dialogues to address these negative attitudes and promote respect for women's rights."

This suggests that social stigma against empowered women poses a serious challenge, underscoring the need for interventions that target community perceptions and attitudes.

Respondent C09 added,

"Community leaders hold significant influence over how women's empowerment is accepted. Where leaders support women's initiatives, we see better attendance and success. Conversely, resistance or indifference from leaders can stall progress. We actively involve chiefs and opinion leaders in program planning and implementation to harness their support."

This means that engaging local power holders is critical in legitimizing empowerment efforts and overcoming societal resistance.

Respondent A10 noted,

"Resistance from some men and elders remains a challenge. They fear that empowered women will disrupt traditional family structures or take away their authority. We organize men's forums to sensitize them on the benefits of shared decision-making and gender equality, which has helped reduce opposition in many areas."

This implies that addressing male resistance through inclusive dialogue is essential for creating a supportive environment for women's empowerment.

Respondent B10 explained,

"Our NGO promotes values that support gender equality by integrating cultural elements in a respectful way. We do not seek to impose foreign ideas but rather build on existing positive traditions that uplift women. This culturally sensitive approach helps gain community acceptance and makes programs more effective."

This reveals that culturally adaptive strategies are important in aligning empowerment programs with societal values to foster ownership and sustainability.

In a related insight, respondent D10 expressed,

“Societal norms sometimes hinder women’s access to resources like land, credit, and education. Even when programs provide these opportunities, social barriers limit women’s ability to fully benefit. For example, women may not be allowed to own land or apply for loans without a male relative’s consent.”

This highlights the intersection of cultural and structural barriers that constrain women’s empowerment despite program efforts.

Respondent C10 observed,

“Changing community perceptions is a slow process, but we have seen progress where awareness campaigns and role models are used. Women who succeed economically serve as examples that challenge negative stereotypes, inspiring others and shifting norms.”

This means that positive visibility and continuous community education are powerful tools to transform attitudes and expand women’s empowerment.

Respondent A11 said,

“We have found that involving beneficiaries in decision-making strengthens the impact of programs. When women feel ownership, they become advocates for change within their communities, helping to gradually reshape societal values around gender roles.”

This suggests that participatory approaches empower women not just economically but socially, enabling them to challenge traditional norms.

Respondent B11 revealed,

“Some cultural beliefs are deeply ingrained and linked to identity, making change difficult. However, working with faith-based leaders and elders who command respect has been effective in promoting messages of equality and empowerment that resonate within cultural contexts.”

This implies that leveraging influential cultural figures is a strategic way to align empowerment goals with societal values.

Respondent D11 emphasized,

“Community resistance often manifests as subtle exclusion or gossip rather than outright opposition, which can be harder to address. Our programs include psychosocial support to help women cope with social pressures and remain resilient in pursuing empowerment.”

This highlights the nuanced social challenges empowered women face and the importance of holistic support mechanisms.

Respondent C11 remarked,

“We also encourage men to participate in gender equality programs, as allies rather than adversaries. This approach reduces backlash and fosters shared understanding of the benefits of empowering women for family and community wellbeing.”

This suggests that male engagement is crucial in shifting societal values towards gender inclusivity.

Respondent A12 shared,

“Some communities view empowerment as a threat to tradition, but when women contribute financially to households and community projects, perceptions shift. Economic contributions challenge old stereotypes and open space for new gender roles.”

This means that tangible economic benefits serve as a catalyst for transforming societal attitudes.

Respondent B12 noted,

“Resistance from society can slow program delivery, but persistence and culturally sensitive strategies help. Our NGO invests in long-term relationships with communities, understanding that empowerment is a gradual journey.”

This implies that patience and cultural competence are vital for sustaining women’s empowerment programs.

Respondent D12 concluded,

“Ultimately, changing societal values requires multi-faceted approaches involving education, dialogue, and role modeling. Our experience shows that combining these strategies leads to more receptive communities and empowered women.”

This reflects the comprehensive nature of social change needed to enhance women’s empowerment.

Consequently, the findings generally shed light on the complex interplay between societal values and women’s empowerment programs in Tororo District. Drawing from the views of respondents A09 to D12, it is evident that cultural beliefs, traditional gender roles, and community attitudes significantly shape both the reach and impact of NGO-led interventions. While entrenched norms often constrain women’s participation, leadership, and access to resources, NGOs have employed culturally sensitive strategies, community engagement, and inclusive dialogues to foster gradual transformation. The narratives reveal that involving men, elders, and local leaders, promoting financial contributions by women, and showcasing successful female role models are effective methods for reshaping attitudes. However, resistance, whether overt or subtle, remains a challenge, underscoring the need for long-term, multifaceted approaches that blend education, psychosocial support, and community ownership. Ultimately, the findings highlight that sustained empowerment is most achievable when societal values evolve alongside programmatic interventions.

Discussion of the findings

The findings indicate that socio-cultural values are not peripheral “context” variables but central mechanisms shaping how women engage with NGO empowerment programmes in Tororo District (see Table 2). This is evidenced by strong agreement that cultural beliefs affect women’s participation ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.12$) and that traditional gender roles limit the impact of women’s initiatives ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.17$) (see Table 2). Interpreted substantively, the results imply that women’s programme participation is socially negotiated within local expectations about women’s “proper” roles, which can constrain mobility, time use, leadership legitimacy, and freedom to benefit from programme inputs (GOAL Uganda, 2025).

A key analytical insight is that cultural beliefs can operate through both internal and external pressures that influence participation quality, not only whether women attend activities but also whether they speak, lead, and retain benefits (Sedlander et al., 2024). Empirical evidence from Uganda demonstrates that gender norms operate through both injunctive norms (what is expected) and descriptive norms (what is practiced), shaping women’s perceived room to act and the social consequences of participation (Sedlander et al., 2024). In this study, the pattern of responses suggests that women may self-limit participation to avoid reputational costs or may face explicit permission barriers, leading to withdrawal or minimal involvement (see Table 2).

The strong agreement that community leaders influence perceptions of women’s empowerment ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.15$) underscores that empowerment programmes operate in a legitimacy environment where leaders can enable or hinder acceptance (see Table 2). This finding aligns with Tororo-specific evidence showing that women may desire to participate in decentralized planning and priority-

setting yet still face sociocultural and procedural barriers that constrain meaningful influence (Razavi et al., 2022). Consequently, women's participation risks becoming nominal, attendance without voice, if participation rules and community authority structures remain gendered, undermining empowerment outcomes even when enrolment targets are achieved (Razavi et al., 2022).

The results also show that resistance from society affects programme delivery to women ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.16$), implying that constraints extend beyond individuals and households into community norms and informal gatekeeping (see Table 2). Such resistance may include stigma, discouragement, exclusion from community decision spaces, or social sanctioning, which can reduce programme reach and continuity (Spotlight Initiative Uganda, 2022). The moderate perception that NGOs address negative societal attitudes ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.20$) suggests uneven norm-change visibility or effectiveness across communities, which is consistent with the variation reflected in neutral and disagreeing responses (see Table 2) (GOAL Uganda, 2025).

The statistically significant correlation between societal values and women's empowerment ($r = .469$, $p < .01$) confirms that socio-cultural norms are empirically linked to empowerment outcomes (see Table 3). However, the moderate size of the relationship suggests that societal values interact with programme design, implementation quality, and local institutional conditions, rather than fully determining empowerment results (GOAL Uganda, 2025). This supports a balanced interpretation that avoids cultural determinism while still treating norms as a key driver that can facilitate or constrain the conversion of programme resources into agency and achievements (Sedlander et al., 2024).

Resource access emerges as a structural constraint that may cap sustainability: respondents agreed that societal norms hinder women's access to resources ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.20$) (see Table 2). Contemporary evidence indicates that women's land rights in Uganda remain constrained by entrenched norms and customary practices, contributing to limited land registration and control by women (International Land Coalition, 2024). Where women cannot secure or control land and related assets, empowerment initiatives may yield skills and participation without durable economic security because asset control underpins credit access, livelihood investment, and bargaining power (International Land Coalition, 2024).

Finally, strong agreement that changing community perceptions improves women's empowerment ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.23$) indicates that respondents view normative transformation as essential for sustainable outcomes (see Table 2). This is consistent with recent Uganda-based gender and social inclusion evidence emphasizing that sustainable livelihood and empowerment outcomes require challenging harmful norms while strengthening women's leadership and inclusive participation (GOAL Uganda, 2025). The finding that NGOs promote values supporting gender equality ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.13$) indicates positive normative contributions, but the persistence of resistance and mixed perceptions about stigma reduction suggest the need for more consistent, locally credible, and safeguarding-aware norm-change approaches (see Table 2) (Spotlight Initiative Uganda, 2022).

Conclusion

The study established that societal values significantly shape women's empowerment programmes in Tororo District by influencing women's participation, the legitimacy of women-led initiatives, and the ease with which NGOs deliver services to women (see Table 2). The statistically significant association between societal values and women's empowerment outcomes ($r = .469$, $p < .01$) confirms that socio-cultural norms are empirically linked to programme effectiveness rather than being incidental contextual factors (see Table 3). These findings are consistent with evidence that

gender norms function as enforceable expectations that shape what women perceive as permissible and the social risks attached to empowerment participation (Sedlander et al., 2024).

Implications (revised, concise, without citations)

The findings imply that women's empowerment programmes should be designed and evaluated as interventions operating in a norm-governed environment, because community beliefs shape both uptake and participation quality (see Table 2). Therefore, NGOs should not rely mainly on output indicators such as attendance or numbers trained, since women may participate yet remain constrained by stigma and gatekeeping that limit voice and control over benefits. Embedding gender equality and social inclusion approaches into implementation is thus necessary to identify, monitor, and respond to norm barriers systematically.

A second implication is that programme legitimacy is socially mediated, with community leaders acting as key validators or blockers of women's empowerment efforts (see Table 2). Leader engagement should therefore be treated as a central implementation strategy for reducing resistance and increasing social authorization for women's participation, rather than a one-off mobilisation activity. When sociocultural and procedural barriers persist in local decision spaces, women can experience participation without real influence, limiting the transformative potential of "participatory" programmes.

A third implication is that resistance and stigma constitute predictable programme risks that can reduce delivery effectiveness and expose women to sanctioning or harm (see Table 2). Interventions that shift gender power relations should therefore integrate prevention and response mechanisms to sustain participation safely. Safeguarding needs to be treated as a core empowerment condition rather than a supplementary add-on.

A fourth implication is that empowerment gains may remain fragile where women's control over productive resources, especially land, continues to be constrained by customary norms and gendered governance. When women's land rights are weak and registration in women's names is limited, credit access, investment capacity, and bargaining power are restricted. Consequently, programmes that focus mainly on training or group participation may produce gains that are difficult to sustain if women cannot secure or control assets that anchor economic autonomy.

Recommendations

Programmes should strengthen norm-responsive and gender-transformative work alongside technical empowerment inputs. Given the strong perception that changing community perceptions improves women's empowerment (see Table 2), NGOs should implement sustained community dialogue, locally credible messaging, and role-model strategies, while tracking attitude change over time. These approaches should be applied consistently across sites to reduce uneven stigma reduction implied by mixed responses on whether NGOs address negative attitudes.

NGOs should institutionalize community leader engagement as a structured programme component with defined roles and accountability. Since leaders influence empowerment perceptions (see Table 2), programmes should map influential actors, partner with supportive leaders, and engage resistant leaders using locally legitimate frames that emphasize shared community benefits. Doing so can reduce "participation without influence" by strengthening legitimacy for women's voice in community forums and programme governance spaces.

Safeguarding and backlash mitigation should be mainstreamed throughout programme design and delivery. In response to societal resistance affecting programme delivery (see Table 2), NGOs should

integrate confidential reporting, survivor-centred referral pathways, and prevention components that address harmful norms and reduce risks of violence or social sanctioning. Staff should also be trained to identify early signs of backlash and to respond ethically so that empowerment does not inadvertently increase harm for participants.

Finally, programmes should address women's resource-control constraints directly, particularly in relation to land and other productive assets. NGOs should partner with legal aid and land-governance actors to strengthen women's land literacy, support documentation and claims processes, and improve dispute-resolution mechanisms, given persistent norm-driven barriers to women's land rights. Integrating these measures into empowerment programming can strengthen sustainability by enabling women to convert participation and skills into durable economic agency anchored in secure assets.

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