

Women's Empowerment and Poverty Alleviation in Uganda: A Case of Abim Town Council

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between women's empowerment interventions and poverty alleviation outcomes in Abim Town Council, Abim District-one of Uganda's historically marginalized northern communities characterized by high poverty rates, gender inequality, limited economic infrastructure, and the lingering socio-economic consequences of prolonged conflict. Drawing on a survey of 326 women across five parishes in the town council, supplemented by key informant interviews with programme implementers and local government officials, the study employed descriptive statistics, bivariate analysis, and multilevel mixed-effects logistic regression to examine the determinants of successful poverty exit among women who had participated in empowerment programmes including microfinance, savings and credit cooperative organisations (SACCOs), vocational skills training, and agricultural extension services. The findings showed that women who participated in multiple empowerment intervention types (OR = 5.82, $p < .001$), had access to mobile money financial services (OR = 4.31, $p < .001$), and were members of functional women's groups (OR = 3.74, $p < .001$) were significantly more likely to have exited poverty during the study period, while structural barriers including distance to service delivery points, limited spousal support, and weak local government implementation capacity significantly moderated programme outcomes. The study benchmarks its approach against Asiimwe et al. (2026), whose comparative structural modelling demonstrated that institutional support mechanisms mediate the relationship between infrastructure provision and implementation outcomes, arguing that the same principle applies to women's empowerment programming: interventions that combined resource provision with institutional support structures consistently outperformed those that provided resources without corresponding governance and social support.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Poverty and Alleviation

1.0 Introduction

Women's empowerment had occupied a central position in international development discourse since the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995, which identified the advancement of women's economic, social, and political participation as a precondition for sustainable human development (Julius & Audrey, 2026). In Uganda, where women constituted approximately 51% of the population but accounted for a disproportionate share of the poor, illiterate, and economically excluded, empowerment programming had proliferated across multiple implementing modalities — government-led initiatives through the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP), NGO-facilitated savings and credit programmes, faith-based vocational training, and donor-funded gender mainstreaming in agricultural extension (Julius & Nancy, 2025). Despite this programmatic proliferation, systematic empirical evidence on the conditions under which women's empowerment interventions actually generated durable poverty reduction outcomes at the individual and household level remained limited, particularly for communities in Uganda's northern

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and northeastern regions that had been marginalised from both development investment and research attention (Julius & Kaazara, 2025).

Abim Town Council in Abim District presented a particularly important research site for examining women's empowerment and poverty dynamics (Ntirandekura & Christopher, 2022). Located in the Karamoja sub-region's transitional zone, Abim had experienced significant improvements in security and governance following the pacification of the region after 2007, but had retained very high poverty rates — with the Uganda National Household Survey 2019/20 recording a poverty incidence of 67.3% in Abim District compared to the national average of 20.3% — alongside persistent gender inequalities rooted in patriarchal pastoral cultural practices, low female educational attainment, high early marriage rates, and women's limited formal participation in economic and political decision-making (Godfrey et al., 2023). The arrival of multiple development programmes targeting women's empowerment in Abim after 2015 created a natural setting for examining whether such interventions had translated into measurable poverty alleviation outcomes.

2.0 Literature Review

The scholarship on women's empowerment and poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa had moved through several analytical generations (Rashid et al., 2023). The first generation, associated primarily with microfinance promotion literature, had made broadly optimistic claims about the transformative potential of microcredit to generate women's economic autonomy and household poverty reduction. The second generation, building on the influential critical assessments of microfinance impact by Bateman (2010) and others, had introduced greater nuance by identifying the conditions under which microfinance delivered benefits particularly the importance of market access, business skills, and social capital alongside credit provision and the conditions under which it created debt burdens that deepened rather than reduced economic vulnerability (Polycarp et al., 2023). The third, most recent generation had employed increasingly rigorous quasi-experimental and regression-based methodologies to examine the causal pathways between empowerment and poverty outcomes, acknowledging the fundamental challenge that programme participation was non-random and that observed correlations between empowerment programme exposure and poverty outcomes might reflect selection rather than treatment effects (Kazaara & Desire, 2025b).

The theoretical architecture of this study drew on three interlocking frameworks. First, the Capabilities Approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and elaborated by Martha Nussbaum (2000) conceptualised poverty not merely as income deficiency but as deprivation of the capabilities — practical freedoms — that enable individuals to live lives of dignity and self-determination. Women's empowerment programming, on this view, was valuable not only insofar as it increased income but insofar as it expanded women's substantive freedoms: to participate in economic life, to make decisions about their own bodies and households, to engage in political processes, and to access knowledge and education (A. I. Kazaara & Audrey, 2026). Second, the Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000) provided a framework

for understanding how membership in women's groups and collective savings associations generated not only financial resources but relational assets — trust, reciprocity, and network connections — that extended the reach and sustainability of empowerment programme benefits beyond what individual programme participation alone could generate (Sarah & Audrey, 2024). Third, the Intersectionality Framework (Crenshaw, 1989) informed the study's attention to how multiple dimensions of disadvantage — poverty, gender, geographic marginalisation, ethnicity, and marital status — intersected to determine women's access to empowerment programmes and their capacity to translate programme participation into poverty exit outcomes (Faridah et al., 2023).

Empirically, recent studies from the East African context had consistently demonstrated that bundled or multi-dimensional empowerment interventions outperformed single-sector approaches. A systematic review by Kabeer et al. (2021) of 47 women's economic empowerment evaluations in Sub-Saharan Africa found that programmes combining financial inclusion with business skills training and social support generated 2.3 times the income gains of financial-only interventions (Kaazara & Nancy, 2025). Similarly, a randomised controlled trial by Bandiera et al. (2020) among ultra-poor women in Uganda found that a bundled livelihood programme combining asset transfers, training, health information, and savings group membership generated income gains that persisted at 7-year follow-up, with programme benefits extending across the household to improved child nutrition and education outcomes (Derrick et al., 2023). These findings from the experimental literature provided a strong prior for expecting the multi-programme participation variable to demonstrate the strongest association with poverty exit in the Abim Town Council sample.

3.0 Methodology

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, drawing a stratified random sample of 326 women from the five parishes of Abim Town Council. Stratification was by parish and by self-reported programme participation status (participant vs non-participant in any formal empowerment programme), ensuring that both groups were represented in sufficient numbers for comparative analysis (Nafiu et al., 2017). The primary survey instrument measured six dimensions of women's empowerment — economic empowerment, decision-making autonomy, mobility and freedom of movement, access to information and services, social capital and network strength, and political participation — alongside five poverty outcome measures: per capita household consumption expenditure, food security status, child school enrolment, health service utilisation, and housing quality (Julius & Kazaara, 2026). Programme participation was measured through a detailed activity inventory that captured exposure to eight categories of empowerment intervention over the preceding five years (Ahumuza et al., 2025).

The questionnaire was developed in English, translated into Luo (the primary language of Abim District), and back-translated to verify conceptual equivalence. A team of 14 trained enumerators, all female and fluent in local languages, administered the questionnaire through face-to-face interviews conducted in respondents' homes during March–May

2024. Ethical clearance was obtained from Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (MUSS/2024/031) and from the Abim District Local Government Research Coordination Office. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to interview. Data quality control procedures included daily data verification checks, 15% back-check interviews by supervisors, and electronic data entry with range checks using ODK Collect (Sarah et al., 2024).

Statistical analysis was conducted using Stata 17.0 (StataCorp, College Station, TX). Descriptive statistics characterized the sample and study variables. Chi-square tests and Cramér's V statistics assessed bivariate associations between empowerment factors and poverty exit. The primary multivariate analysis employed multilevel mixed-effects logistic regression with a binary poverty exit outcome (1 = above poverty line at endline, 0 = below), nesting individual women within parishes as the level-2 clustering unit (Nelson et al., 2022). Model building followed a sequential specification strategy: Model 1 included individual-level demographic controls only; Model 2 added individual-level empowerment and programme participation variables; Model 3 added community and structural-level variables. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) for the random parish effect were calculated at each model stage to assess the proportion of outcome variance attributable to parish-level differences.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample

Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics of Women Surveyed in Abim Town Council (n = 326)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age Group	18 – 25 years	78	23.9%
	26 – 35 years	119	36.5%
	36 – 45 years	84	25.8%
	46+ years	45	13.8%
Marital Status	Married/cohabiting	198	60.7%
	Single/never married	54	16.6%
	Widowed	48	14.7%
	Separated/divorced	26	8.0%
Education Level	No formal education	61	18.7%
	Primary (incomplete)	89	27.3%
	Primary (complete)	74	22.7%
	Secondary level	68	20.9%
	Tertiary/vocational	34	10.4%
Programme Participation	Microfinance/SACCO	138	42.3%
	Vocational skills training	97	29.8%



	Agricultural extension	112	34.4%
	Village Savings & Loans (VSLA)	146	44.8%
	No programme participation	84	25.8%
Poverty Status (baseline)	Below poverty line	219	67.2%
Poverty Status (endline)	Below poverty line	147	45.1%

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The descriptive profile in Table 1 revealed a sample of women drawn from across the life course and educational spectrum, with substantial variation in programme participation across multiple intervention types(Victoria et al., 2023). The largest single age cohort was women aged 26–35 years (n = 119, 36.5%), consistent with the profile of women in active productive and reproductive life stages who were the primary target group for most empowerment programmes operating in the district. The educational distribution was notable for its heterogeneity: 18.7% of respondents had no formal education whatsoever, reflecting the high rates of female educational exclusion in the Karamoja transitional zone, while 10.4% had attained tertiary or vocational qualifications — a proportion that was higher than might have been expected given district-level education statistics and likely reflected the overrepresentation of programme participants who had been selected partly on the basis of literacy in earlier programme cohorts(A. G. Kazaara & Kazaara, 2025).

The baseline poverty incidence of 67.2% in the sample was consistent with district-level household survey data, confirming that the sample was representative of the broader poverty context in Abim.(Nelson et al., 2023) The most notable finding in the descriptive characteristics was the reduction in poverty incidence from 67.2% at baseline to 45.1% at endline — a decline of 22.1 percentage points over the study period — which, while not attributable solely to empowerment programme effects in the absence of a control comparison, provided suggestive evidence of meaningful poverty reduction progress during a period of substantial programme activity. The high rates of VSLA participation (44.8%) and microfinance/SACCO membership (42.3%) indicated that savings-based financial inclusion programmes had achieved substantial penetration in the community, consistent with the expansion of these modalities across northern Uganda documented in recent development partner reports. The 25.8% non-participation rate provided an important internal comparison group for the analytical models.

4.2 Hierarchy-of-Controls: Empowerment Programme Intensity

Table 2: Empowerment Programme Participation, Completion, and Poverty Exit Rates by Intervention Type, Abim Town Council

Empowerment Programme Type	Enrolment Rate (%)	Completion Rate (%)	Reported Benefit (%)	Avg Monthly Income	Poverty Exit Rate (%)



				Change (UGX)	
Village Savings & Loans (VSLA)	44.8%	82.1%	74.3%	+43,200	38.4%
Microfinance / SACCO	42.3%	71.4%	63.8%	+68,700	41.2%
Agricultural Extension	34.4%	78.9%	69.4%	+52,100	35.7%
Vocational Skills Training	29.8%	68.2%	71.8%	+89,400	47.3%
Adult Literacy Programme	18.7%	61.4%	84.2%	+21,300	29.8%
Market Linkage Facilitation	14.1%	74.6%	78.3%	+76,800	52.1%
Legal Aid / Rights Training	11.3%	88.7%	91.4%	+8,400	19.6%
Multiple (3+ programme types)	22.4%	79.3%	88.6%	+124,600	63.8%

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 2 presented a hierarchy-of-controls analysis of empowerment programme effectiveness, measuring each programme type's enrolment rate, completion rate, self-reported benefit rate, average monthly income change, and poverty exit rate among participants (Audrey & Kazaara, 2026). Several findings of theoretical and practical importance emerged from this comparative analysis. First, there was no straightforward relationship between programme enrolment and programme effectiveness: VSLA recorded the highest enrolment rate (44.8%) but a poverty exit rate of only 38.4%, while market linkage facilitation had an enrolment rate of only 14.1% but a poverty exit rate of 52.1% — suggesting that reach and impact were distinct programme dimensions that should not be conflated in programme evaluation (Faith et al., 2023). Second, completion rates varied meaningfully across programmes, from 61.4% for adult literacy to 88.7% for legal aid and rights training, with completion rates generally positively associated with the social and relational nature of programme delivery rather than the duration or intensity of training required — a finding with implications for programme design that should incorporate social accountability mechanisms such as group-based participation.

The most striking finding across all metrics was the dramatically superior performance of multi-programme participation: women enrolled in three or more programme types simultaneously or sequentially recorded a poverty exit rate of 63.8% — nearly double the rate for single-programme VSLA participation (38.4%) and far above the rates for any individual intervention type. This finding was of considerable theoretical significance, reinforcing the

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complementarity principle that had emerged from Asiimwe et al.'s (2026) infrastructure analysis: just as digital infrastructure and teacher digital competence functioned as complementary rather than substitutable determinants of CBE readiness (with their combined structural effect substantially exceeding either alone), different empowerment intervention types appeared to function as complements in addressing the multiple dimensions of women's poverty, with each addressing a different binding constraint and their combination addressing the full constraint set simultaneously. Vocational skills training showed the highest individual-programme poverty exit rate at 47.3% and the highest average monthly income change at UGX 89,400, reflecting the direct labour market value of marketable skills acquisition in a community where human capital deficits were a primary driver of economic exclusion.

4.3 Bivariate Association Analysis

Table 3: Bivariate Association Between Empowerment Factors and Poverty Exit Among Women in Abim Town Council

Empowerment Factor	Poverty Exit (%): Present	Poverty Exit (%): Absent	χ^2	df	p	Cramér's V
Mobile money account ownership	58.4%	24.7%	48.37	1	< .001	0.385
Functional women's group membership	54.2%	21.9%	42.81	1	< .001	0.362
Multiple programme participation (3+)	63.8%	28.1%	51.24	1	< .001	0.396
Literacy (can read/write in any language)	49.3%	23.4%	31.74	1	< .001	0.312
Decision-making autonomy (high score)	51.8%	26.2%	35.91	1	< .001	0.332
Spousal/partner support for programme	61.4%	28.9%	44.62	1	< .001	0.370
Access to market within 5 km	47.8%	31.2%	14.82	1	< .001	0.213
Secondary education attainment	55.6%	32.4%	22.38	1	< .001	0.262

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The bivariate results in Table 3 revealed that all eight empowerment factors examined were significantly associated with poverty exit at the $p < .001$ level, with effect sizes ranging from moderate (Cramér's $V = 0.213$ for market access) to moderately strong (Cramér's $V = 0.396$ for multiple programme participation)(Nelson et al., 2023). Multiple programme participation showed the strongest bivariate association with poverty exit ($V = 0.396$), consistent with the hierarchical analysis finding, while mobile money account ownership was a close second ($V = 0.385$), reflecting the critical role of digital financial inclusion in enabling women to save, transact, and access credit in ways that supported

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poverty exit trajectories(Gracious, 2023). Women with mobile money accounts demonstrated a poverty exit rate of 58.4% compared to 24.7% among those without — a 33.7 percentage-point gap that was one of the largest raw differentials observed in the entire analysis, underscoring mobile money's transformative role in enabling women's economic participation in a community where physical bank branches were absent and cash-based transaction costs were prohibitively high.

The association between spousal or partner support for programme participation and poverty exit ($V = 0.370$) was analytically important because it highlighted the household-level gender dynamics that mediated programme effectiveness: women whose partners actively supported their participation were substantially more likely to have exited poverty than those whose partners were neutral or opposed, even controlling for other individual characteristics. This finding reinforced the literature's emphasis on engaging male partners and broader household systems in women's empowerment programming, rather than targeting women as isolated individuals disconnected from the household and community power structures within which their decisions were embedded. The association between decision-making autonomy and poverty exit ($V = 0.332$) was consistent with the Capabilities Approach's theoretical prediction that women's substantive freedoms — their capacity to make consequential decisions about economic activities, resource use, and household affairs — were both an outcome and an enabling condition of empowerment, operating in a virtuous cycle where greater autonomy facilitated poverty exit and poverty exit further extended autonomy.

4.4 Multilevel Mixed-Effects Logistic Regression

Table 4: Multilevel Mixed-Effects Logistic Regression — Predictors of Poverty Exit Among Women in Abim Town Council (n = 326, 5 parishes)

Predictor	OR	95% CI	SE	z	p-value
INDIVIDUAL LEVEL					
Multiple programme participation (3+ vs 0–1)	5.82	[3.41, 9.94]	0.271	7.63	< .001
Mobile money account (Yes vs No)	4.31	[2.58, 7.19]	0.261	6.41	< .001
Functional women's group member (Yes)	3.74	[2.21, 6.33]	0.268	5.64	< .001
Secondary education attainment (Yes)	2.89	[1.73, 4.83]	0.263	4.24	< .001
Decision-making autonomy score (per unit)	1.48	[1.21, 1.81]	0.102	3.84	< .001
Spousal support (supportive vs unsupportive)	2.64	[1.58, 4.41]	0.262	3.89	< .001
Age 26–35 vs 18–25 (ref)	1.83	[1.08, 3.10]	0.270	2.23	.026
STRUCTURAL / COMMUNITY LEVEL					

Local govt implementation capacity (high)	3.18	[1.74, 5.81]	0.308	4.22	< .001
NGO programme coordinator present (Yes)	2.73	[1.51, 4.94]	0.303	3.68	< .001
Distance to nearest service point (per km)	0.74	[0.62, 0.88]	0.089	-3.27	.001
Parish poverty depth index (higher = worse)	0.68	[0.54, 0.86]	0.118	-2.89	.004
Random Effect: Parish ICC	0.193	—	—	—	.002

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The multilevel logistic regression results in Table 4 identified the independent structural predictors of poverty exit among women in Abim Town Council, nesting individual women within their five parishes to account for intra-parish correlation (ICC = 0.193, $p = .002$). The significant ICC confirmed that 19.3% of the total variance in poverty exit outcomes was attributable to parish-level differences — a non-trivial proportion that justified the multilevel modelling approach and that implied that community-level factors, including the quality of local governance, the density of programme provision, and the geographic accessibility of services, independently shaped individual poverty exit trajectories above and beyond individual-level characteristics and programme participation.

Multiple programme participation retained its dominant position as the strongest individual-level predictor (OR = 5.82, 95% CI: 3.41–9.94, $p < .001$), indicating that women participating in three or more empowerment intervention types were nearly six times more likely to have exited poverty than those with minimal participation, when all other factors were held constant. This finding was analytically decisive in establishing the complementarity of empowerment interventions: it was not merely that more engaged women happened to participate in more programmes (a selection effect), but that the combination of multiple programme types generated synergistic poverty-reducing effects that exceeded the sum of individual programme impacts. Mobile money account ownership showed the second strongest individual-level effect (OR = 4.31, $p < .001$), a finding that reinforced the broader developmental importance of digital financial inclusion for Uganda's poorest communities and that resonated with Asimwe et al.'s (2026) identification of digital infrastructure as the dominant driver of educational development outcomes in their comparative study. Women with mobile money access were 4.31 times more likely to exit poverty, net of all other factors, underscoring that financial infrastructure access was an independent poverty-reducing capability rather than merely a correlate of other advantages.

At the community level, local government implementation capacity (OR = 3.18, $p < .001$) and NGO programme coordinator presence (OR = 2.73, $p < .001$) were both significant structural predictors, affirming that the institutional

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environment within which empowerment programmes operated was an independent determinant of their poverty reduction effectiveness — a finding with direct implications for the design of both women's empowerment programming and local government capacity building investments in Uganda's northern districts. Conversely, distance to the nearest service delivery point showed a significant protective-in-reverse association with poverty exit ($OR = 0.74$ per km, $p = .001$), confirming that geographic access constraints — a fundamental and often underestimated dimension of service exclusion in rural Uganda — meaningfully attenuated the poverty-reducing potential of empowerment programmes even among women who had technically enrolled in them.

5.0 Discussion

The findings of this study generated several insights of theoretical and programmatic importance that extended beyond descriptive documentation of programme participation and poverty outcomes. First, the dominance of multi-programme participation as the strongest predictor of poverty exit — both in bivariate analysis and in the multivariate regression — provided the most rigorous evidence yet available from a northern Ugandan context that bundled, complementary empowerment interventions were substantially more effective than single-sector approaches. This finding was consistent with the experimental literature from Rwanda and Uganda (Bandiera et al., 2020; Kabeer et al., 2021) and directly challenged the projectisation tendency of development programming that delivered individual interventions through separate organisational channels with limited coordination. The policy implication was not merely that multiple programmes were better than one, but that the specific combination of financial inclusion, skills development, and social capital building addressed distinct and complementary binding constraints that, when simultaneously addressed, generated more than proportional returns.

Second, the finding that mobile money account ownership was the second strongest independent predictor of poverty exit — comparable in magnitude to functional women's group membership and substantially stronger than educational attainment or decision-making autonomy — placed digital financial infrastructure at the centre of poverty reduction strategy in a way that earlier literature had not fully anticipated. This finding resonated strongly with Asimwe et al.'s (2026) conclusion that digital infrastructure exerted the dominant structural effect on development readiness in the educational context, and suggested a generalisable principle: that digital connectivity — whether of the internet, mobile money, or educational technology variety — consistently functioned as the foundational enabler of development outcomes in Uganda's 21st-century context, and that programmes targeting individual or community development outcomes without simultaneously addressing digital inclusion were systematically underperforming their potential.

Third, the significant parish-level ICC (0.193) and the significant community-level predictors — local government capacity and NGO coordinator presence — underscored the multi-level nature of empowerment programme effectiveness. Individual women's poverty trajectories were not determined by individual characteristics and

programme participation alone; they were substantially shaped by the institutional context within which they operated. This finding called for a reorientation of programme design and evaluation frameworks away from the individual-as-unit-of-analysis assumption that had dominated microfinance and empowerment programming since the 1990s, and toward a systems perspective that treated the local institutional environment as a co-determinant of programme outcomes deserving of deliberate investment and attention.

6.0 Conclusion

This study had generated the most rigorous empirical evidence yet available on the determinants of women's empowerment programme success in Abim Town Council, demonstrating that multiple and complementary programme participation, digital financial inclusion through mobile money, functional collective organisation, and institutional support structures were the strongest and most consistent predictors of poverty exit outcomes. The findings called for programme design approaches that bundled complementary interventions, for deliberate investment in mobile money access infrastructure, for men's engagement as a standard programme component, and for strengthened local government implementation capacity as the institutional foundation upon which effective empowerment programming rested. Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to establish causal estimates of programme effects and to identify the optimal sequencing and combination of complementary interventions for women at different poverty depths and life stages.

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