

Fostering agency and wellbeing in women: an evaluation of the IMAGINE Initiative

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There is growing evidence that fostering individual agency for women is important for effective economic development and well-being. This article assesses the outcomes of the IMAGINE Initiative in Kenya, a programme intended to empower individuals through a four-day interactive workshop. Routine de-identified programme data from 213 individuals who applied to participate were used. Data included socio-demographic measures, psychometric scales, and interviews of changes in education, health, economics, and relationships. Programmatic data showed significant changes in the level of intrinsic motivation and agency for those who underwent the training and as well as substantial behavioural changes in core areas of their lives.

On observe une quantité croissante de données factuelles qui indiquent que le fait de favoriser le libre-arbitre individuel pour les femmes est important pour un développement économique efficace et pour le bien-être. Cet article traite des résultats de l'IMAGINE Initiative au Kenya, un programme visant à autonomiser les personnes à travers un atelier de travail interactif de quatre jours. Des données de programme systématiquement anonymisées provenant de 213 personnes qui ont demandé à participer ont été utilisées. Parmi ces données figuraient des mesures sociodémographiques, des échelles psychométriques et des entretiens sur les changements survenus dans les domaines de l'éducation, la santé, l'économie et les relations. Des données programmatiques ont mis en évidence des changements considérables pour ce qui est du degré de motivation et de libre-arbitre intrinsèques pour ceux qui ont suivi la formation, ainsi que des changements comportementaux considérables dans des aspects essentiels de leur vie.

Cada vez existe más evidencia en torno al hecho de que fomentar la voluntad individual en las mujeres resulta importante para lograr el desarrollo económico efectivo y el bienestar. El presente artículo valora los resultados obtenidos a partir de la implementación de la Iniciativa IMAGINE en Kenia, cuyo objetivo apuntó a lograr el empoderamiento de las personas a través de un taller interactivo de cuatro días. Para tal efecto, se utilizaron los datos programáticos de rutina despojados de identificadores, los cuales fueron obtenidos de 213 individuos que solicitaron participar. Tales datos abarcaron las medidas sociodemográficas y las escalas psicométricas. Asimismo, se efectuaron encuestas a partir de las que se indagó sobre la existencia de cambios en la educación, la salud, la economía y las relaciones. El análisis de los datos programáticos dio cuenta de que se produjeron cambios significativos en el nivel de motivación y de voluntad intrínsecos de quienes participaron en la capacitación, así como cambios sustanciales de comportamiento en los ámbitos más importantes de la vida de dichos participantes.

Keywords: Aid – Monitoring and Evaluation; Capacity development; Gender and diversity; Labour and livelihoods – Poverty reduction; Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

The recognition that empowerment of women is a primary driver of sustainable development has led to numerous initiatives globally to raise access to opportunities and improve the status of women over the last several decades (IFAD 2010; World Bank 2005). The commitment to engage women in development was affirmed by the Millennium Summit and reiterated for the post-2015 agenda (UN 2010). There has been some evidence of success, most notably in education (UNESCO 2012); however, substantial obstacles remain to reducing violence against women, improving their access to basic needs, health services, and economic opportunity (Buvinic et al. 2008). Despite the clear rationale to invest in women and the commitment by some donors to do so, simply providing external resources can often fail to mobilise women, whose life experience and socio-cultural barriers may not have prepared them to pursue new educational, economic, or personal opportunities availed to them (Sen 1985; Wallerstein 2006).

The World Bank recently focused their attention on the need to enhance women's voice and agency (Klugman et al. 2014). As defined in this World Bank report, individual agency refers to the capacity to make decisions about one's own life and act on them to achieve a desired outcome, free of violence, retribution, or fear. While multiple approaches have been used to increase the strength of women's voice in society, few have directly addressed the psychological needs of the individual (Wallerstein 2006). Within international development programming, there are many paths to women's empowerment; most traditionally, these programmes focus on providing skills, education, opportunity, and promoting equitable governance. These are important endeavours. However, according to Sen (1999), "*efforts are needed that foster women's sense of self, resulting in greater self-esteem, motivation, self-respect and self-reliance*". Indeed, this serves as the foundation that enables these other endeavours to fully succeed. The United Nations Development Programme (Grown, Rao Gupta, and Kes 2005) clearly articulates the challenge that we face in the context of women's empowerment:

"The concept of empowerment is related to gender equality but distinct from it. The core of empowerment lies in the ability of a woman to control her own destiny. This implies that to be empowered a woman must not only have equal capabilities (such as education and health) and equal access to resources and opportunities (such as land and employment), they must also have the agency to use those rights, capabilities, resources and opportunities to make strategic choices and decisions" (2005, 3)

The empowerment process is not a constant, but rather a continuing development that involves changes to strengthen and exercise the ability to act to gain control and mastery over life, community, and society (Sen 1985; Zimmerman 2000). While community participation and shared leadership may be empowering processes, we explore the capacity of this intervention to foster individual perceived control and resource mobilisation skills. The programme, IMAGINE: Kenya, is designed specifically to build and foster human agency for disenfranchised women. The primary emphasis of this programme is to help individuals increase their self-knowledge, through an Empowerment Workshop, so they can discover what is important to them; translate this knowledge into a compelling vision; identify and transform the limiting beliefs that inevitably arise when creating something new; and adopt an actionable growth strategy to attain their goals (Gershon and Straub 2011). These empowerment tools then serve as part of an ongoing support system to enable further personal growth over time and enhance the programme's impact, beyond the woman, to her family and community (Laughlin 2004). This study examines the impact of this programme on populations of rural and urban poor in Kenya.

Setting and methods

The programme implemented a modified and culturally adapted form of the Empowerment Workshop (Gershon and Straub 2011) with key components of women's group engagement (Laughlin 2004) and group savings (Allen 2005). In the workshop, generally lasting four days (approximately 32 hours of engagement), individuals participate in an introspective examination of their lives, thoughts, and environmental context, and they review issues of critical importance to them, including their dreams and goals for the future. Over the course of the workshop individuals review seven areas of their lives: emotions, relationships, sexuality, body, money, work, and spirituality.

The IMAGINE empowerment workshop

Each workshop is conducted by a trained local empowerment facilitator and the content has been modified and adapted to serve the local population. The empowerment facilitator generally is part of a local NGO or training institution, is fluent in the native language, and has a deep understanding of the socio-cultural context. Trainers work within their programme catchment area and women are informed about the upcoming workshop and given an opportunity to participate. Oftentimes, women belong to an existing self-help group, but that is not a prerequisite for participating. A workshop typically consists of 20–25 participants, one or two facilitators, and assistants to document the activities of the workshop. Women are not paid to attend, but are provided with food and drink during the workshop.

The workshop is culturally adapted to reflect the current needs and challenges of the participants. For example, Nyanza province has some of the highest HIV prevalence rates in the country and the discussion around sexuality included health information related to practices that increase HIV transmission and practices that may help mitigate the negative effects of the disease. Information on local health NGOs and governmental programmes able to provide additional assistance is discussed. The primary enhancements to the basic empowerment methodology are generally related to health, economic, and work opportunities. Moreover, culturally relevant examples, either from religious texts or local social norms, are used to emphasise specific points during the discussion.

Setting

This study was conducted in an urban slum of Nairobi (Kayole Spring Valley slum, population approximately 6,000) and in the towns and rural regions of Nyanza Province (Migori and Rusinga Island, population approximately 60,000). In the rural regions, most of the population are engaged in subsistence agriculture (maize and millet), as well as fishing. Poverty is rampant in these regions and communities often face challenges because of poor roads, including limited access to government and health facilities. The Kayole slum area in Nairobi is home to multiple ethnic groups that have been displaced from other regions of the city. NGO efforts have supported several educational and development activities in the area. Economic activities include small enterprises such as sales of food, fish, or durable goods. This programme was conducted with members of several women's self-help groups including the Kayole Women's Group (Nairobi) and in Nyanza Province, the Sanga Women's group, the Kiringi Women's group, the Karanda Self-Help Group in God Jope, the Lambwe Women's Group, the Kamasegere-West Women's Group, and the Peterson-Gunda Women's Group on Rusinga Island. Membership in these women's self-help groups can also include men and therefore some of the participants in the workshop and this evaluation were men (approximately 10%). Selection for workshop participation was done as

follows: (1) groups were informed about the workshop; and (2) each group was to select up to five individuals of those interested to participate. It was acknowledged that the others who were interested would be placed on a waiting list for the next workshop. All participants in this evaluation are members of these women's groups; however, not everyone had yet participated in the empowerment intervention.

Study design

A total of 213 individuals, primarily women (90%), were interviewed for this research. This included 137 individuals who were interested in participating, but had not yet undergone the training in the Empowerment Workshop, and 76 individuals who had completed this training. All untrained individuals were part of these same women's self-help groups in the area.

The evaluation process included a structured interview that included basic socio-demographic information and two scales of well-being. The Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff and Keyes 1995) and the Hope Scale (Snyder 1995) (Table 1). The Ryff inventory consists of 54 questions (medium form) and includes a series of statements reflecting the six areas of psychological well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. The Hope Scale, based on the work by Snyder (Snyder 1995), has eight focused questions that attempt to capture hope as a combination of willpower (agency) or "waypower" (pathways) (Pattengale 2004). All scale questions were translated into either Kiswahili (for Nairobi slums) or Luo (for Nyanza province). Seven interviewers were trained to conduct the interviews among the group members. Interviewers were trained to review the rating system (1 to 6) and to review each question to ensure appropriate understanding.

A short open-ended interview was also conducted with approximately 80% of all participants (101 untrained, 71 trained, total 172). These interviews were conducted by assistants fluent in both English and Kiswahili and/or Luo, using dual-language ethnographic field guides. This short interview included an open format with questions on the specific stories of success since the time of the workshop (if individuals had not participated in the workshop, they were asked to describe a positive story since the time that the workshop had been conducted in their area). The interview also included specific questions on changes in the condition of the educational status for the individuals themselves or those they are responsible for, changes in the condition of their relationships with others, and changes in the economic condition and changes in the condition of health for themselves or those they care for. The interviews lasted from 10 to 25 minutes each. All interviews were transcribed into English.

Each short interview was reviewed and responses were coded for the presence or absence of specific behaviour change. Qualitative analysis was done through a targeted coding of interviews based on specific a priori content areas determined to be of interest to the programme activities. This included information since the time that the workshop was held in their area: (1) changes in education status for themselves or those they care for (improved, same, or decreased); (2) changes in their relationship with family and/or friends (improved, same, or decreased); (3) changes in health status for themselves or those they care for (improved, same, or decreased); and (4) changes in economic condition due to increased capital earned or diversification of income sources (improved, same, or decreased). For each response, further probing was done to understand the basis for their response. For example, if an individual indicated that there was a positive change in education, further probing could result in the statement "I can now pay the school fees for my son and he is attending school this year." A similar probing process was done if individuals indicated no change or a negative change.

Appropriate international ethical guidelines were followed to protect respondents. All participation in the evaluation was voluntary. Verbal informed consent was obtained from each of the

Table 1. Description of each of the scales used in the study.

Definitions of theory-guided dimensions of well-being

Self-acceptance
High scorer: Possesses a positive attitude toward the self; acknowledges and accepts multiple aspects of self, including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life.
Low scorer: Feels dissatisfied with self; is disappointed with what has occurred with past life; is troubled about certain personal qualities; wishes to be different than what he or she is.

Positive relations with others
High scorer: Has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others; is concerned about the welfare of others; capable of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy; understands give and take of human relationships.
Low scorer: Has few close, trusting relationships with others; finds it difficult to be warm, open, and concerned about others; is isolated and frustrated in interpersonal relationships; not willing to make compromises to sustain important ties with others.

Autonomy
High scorer: Is self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulates behaviour from within; evaluates self by personal standards.
Low scorer: Is concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others; relies on judgments of others to make important decisions; conforms to social pressures to think and act in certain ways.

Environmental mastery
High scorer: Has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values.
Low scorer: Has difficulty managing everyday affairs; feels unable to change or improve surrounding context; is unaware of surrounding opportunities; lacks sense of control over external world.

Purpose in life
High scorer: Has goals in life and a sense of directedness; feels there is meaning to present and past life; holds beliefs that give life purpose; has aims and objectives for living.
Low scorer: Lacks a sense of meaning in life; has few goals or aims, lacks sense of direction; does not see purpose of past life; has no outlook or beliefs that give life meaning.

Personal growth
High scorer: Has a feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has sense of realising his or her potential; sees improvement in self and behaviour over time; is changing in ways that reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness.
Low scorer: Has a sense of personal stagnation; lacks sense of improvement or expansion over time; feels bored and uninterested with life; feels unable to develop new attitudes or behaviours.

The Trait Hope Scale (Snyder 1995)
The Hope Scale has only 12 questions, eight focused questions and four distractor questions. The following are the eight questions actually measured. Although the standard process asks participants to rate these questions from 1 (definitely disagree) to 4 (definitely agree), we used the same scale from 1 to 6 to indicate degree of agreement. The sum of these answers provides the Hope Score. The designation of questions is in parentheses: willpower (agency) or waypower (pathways). There are also 4 distractor questions that are not listed here.

Question 1. (Pathways) I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.
Question 2. (Agency) I energetically pursue my goals.
Question 3. (Pathways) There are lots of ways around any problem.
Question 4. (Pathways) I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me.
Question 5. (Pathway) Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.
Question 6. (Agency) My past experiences have prepared me well for my future.
Question 7. (Agency) I've been pretty successful in life.
Question 8. (Agency) I meet the goals that I set for myself.

Note: This table was taken from Ryff and Keyes (1995, 1072).

leaders of the women's groups as well as from each of the participants, in accordance with international ethical standards. Consent of the local NGO was also obtained. This study and all analytical procedures were reviewed by the Johns Hopkins University ethical review board and deemed

exempt from human subjects review as these analyses included secondary de-identified data. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Data analysis

Specific scores for the Ryff and Hope scales were calculated by adding the scores from each of the specific questions in each scale. About half of the questions in the Ryff scale were reverse scored. For each sub-scale, a high score indicates that the respondent has a mastery of that area in their life. Conversely, a low score shows that the respondent struggles to feel comfortable with that particular concept. Preliminary bivariate and multivariate analyses were done to compare groups (UNTRAINED versus TRAINED) for all respondents. Due to non-normality of the scales, non-parametric statistics were calculated using categorical data based on scores that were higher/lower than the population mean. A power analysis determined that at 5% level of significance, with the available sample size we could detect at least a 25% difference between the two groups.

Principal components analysis (PCA) was used to create a socio-economic score (SES) from a pool of questions related to material possessions such as access to electricity, type of latrine used, and occupation of the female and occupation of the male in the household. Quantitative interviews were entered into a Microsoft Access database and data analysis was conducted with SAS 9.3 for Windows. Two types of analyses were conducted to assess impacts of the Empowerment Workshop on scales of well-being: (1) multiple logistic regression analysis controlling for key variables; and (2) matched pair analysis on a subsample of participants. Multiple logistic regression analysis compared proportion of those participants scoring above the mean for the specific sub-scale (classified as scoring high). The model controlled for (1) gender, (2) location (rural or urban), (3) SES (high or low), (4) education (primary school or less versus secondary school or higher), and (5) age.

From the pool of controls, we created a 1:1 matching sub-sample to allow for controlled analyses. Matching was done by (1) gender, (2) location (rural or urban), (3) SES (high or low), (4) education (primary school or less versus secondary school or higher), and (5) age (± 10 years). With respect to age, 80% of the matched cases were within two years of their control and 90% were within five years of their control. The final number of matched pairs available for analysis was 69.

Analysis for the matched pairs included matched-pair t-tests for continuous data and conditional logistic regression analysis for matched case-control studies producing an odds ratio.

Results

The participants represented some of the most disenfranchised populations in Kenya. Most participants were women (90%) from rural (85%) areas, having no access to electricity (85%), having primary schooling or less (72%), and participating in subsistence farming (76%). In addition to high rates of poverty and low levels of education, this region suffers from high rates of HIV, resulting in some of the lowest life expectancies in Kenya (47 years) (Society for International Development 2004). Table 2 compares basic socio-demographic characteristics for the two samples. From this unmatched analysis, it appears that those trained tended to be older, more likely to own a radio, and more likely to use a pit latrine or better.

Table 3 presents the results of the multiple logistic regression on the data for each of the outcome sub-scales for well-being. In this adjusted analysis, we found high levels of self-acceptance (i.e. possessing a positive attitude towards one's self) were expressed by more than 50% of

Table 2. Comparison of basic socio-demographic indicators for total interviewed sample.

Characteristic	Description	Untrained (<i>n</i> = 137) (%)	Trained (<i>n</i> = 76) (%)	<i>p</i> -value
Age group	30 and below	43 (31)	11 (14)	<i>p</i> = 0.020*
	31–40	28 (20)	17 (22)	
	41–50	28 (20)	14 (18)	
	51+	38 (28)	34 (45)	
Gender	Female	120 (88)	72 (95)	<i>p</i> = 0.094
	Male	17 (12)	4 (5)	
Marital status	Single	10 (7)	2 (3)	<i>p</i> = 0.155
	Married	95 (69)	49 (64)	
	Widowed/divorced	32 (23)	25 (33)	
Electricity		18 (13)	13 (17)	<i>p</i> = 0.432
Mobile phone		99 (72)	60 (79)	<i>p</i> = 0.283
TV		33 (24)	20 (26)	<i>p</i> = 0.719
Radio		87 (64)	59 (78)	<i>p</i> = 0.033*
Bicycle/motorbike		36 (26)	22 (28)	<i>p</i> = 0.675
Toilet facilities	Field or other	24 (18)	5 (7)	<i>p</i> = 0.027*
	Pit latrine or better	112 (82)	70 (93)	
Education	Primary or below	100 (73)	54 (71)	<i>p</i> = 0.761
	Secondary or above	37 (27)	22 (29)	
Occupation (female)	Subsistence farming	107 (78)	57 (75)	<i>p</i> = 0.606
	Service or business	30 (22)	19 (25)	
Occupation (male)	Subsistence farming	100 (73)	58 (76)	<i>p</i> = 0.596
	Service or business	37 (27)	18 (24)	

*Indicates a significance value of $p < 0.05$.

participants in both the trained and untrained groups, and did not differ between the groups. Overall, participants also reported very high positive scores related to purpose in life (i.e. having a sense of goals and directedness in their lives) and personal growth (i.e. having a feeling of continued development), with no differences found between the trained or untrained participants.

Table 3. Results of the impact of the Empowerment Workshop on well-being using multiple logistic regression analysis on the full dataset, adjusting for socio-economic status, age, location, educational status, gender.

General scale	Specific scale	% scoring high on scale		Odds Ratio	95% CI	<i>p</i> -value
		Untrained	Trained			
Measures of social agency	Self-acceptance	56	58	1.09	(0.60–2.00)	0.78
	Positive relations w/others	45	62	1.88	(1.02–3.45)	0.04*
	Autonomy	50	43	0.74	(0.40–1.36)	0.34
	Environmental mastery	43	68	3.06	(1.60–5.82)	0.0006*
	Purpose in life	62	58	0.76	(0.41–1.41)	0.39
Measures of hope	Personal growth	52	59	1.40	(0.77–2.55)	0.28
	Hope	56	71	2.10	(1.10–4.01)	0.03*
	Agency	48	63	1.89	(1.02–3.50)	0.04*
	Pathways	54	63	1.56	(0.85–2.86)	0.16

*Indicates a significance value of $p < 0.05$.

There were two Ryff sub-scales where trained participants scored significantly higher than untrained participants, (1) positive relationships with others, and (2) environmental mastery. In positive relationships with others (i.e. has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships), trained participants were nearly twice as likely to score higher on this scale than untrained counterparts. For environmental mastery (i.e. has a sense of competency in managing the environment and makes effective use of surrounding opportunities), trained participants were more than three times more likely to have a higher score on this subscale. By contrast, in the area of autonomy (i.e. is self-determining and independent), trained participants were less likely to score higher on this subscale; however the result was not significant. Of note, in this culture, autonomy is not considered as a desirable trait as cooperation with others is more greatly valued. In addition, trained participants were twice as likely to express hope for the future and nearly twice as likely to express agency than those who had not undergone the Empowerment Workshop.

A conditional logistic regression for the matched pairs, conducted on 69 pairs, showed nearly identical results (Table 4). Individuals who had undergone the empowerment training scored significantly higher in areas related to positive relations to others, environmental mastery, hope, and agency.

The qualitative interviews described even greater improvements in reported life changes since the Empowerment Workshop. In order to quantify reported changes in these areas, we used data from the qualitative reports ($n = 172$) to compare those who had not yet undergone training ($n = 101$) and those who had completed training ($n = 71$). From the full pool of data we find positive changes in education (7% of untrained compared with 18% trained); in health (5% of untrained compared with 55% of trained); in the area of economics (24% untrained compared with 83% trained) and in the area of relationships (5% untrained compared with 75% trained). Excerpts from the qualitative interviews provide a context for the experiences reported by the women. In order to illustrate some of these changes, we present quotes from the field interviews related to the four areas of behaviour change that were discussed.

For education, individuals were most likely to describe a change that has come about as a result of the increased economic conditions in the family. For girl children, however, there are additional challenges. These include time taken from school that could otherwise be used for basic household chores, and the lack of proper feminine hygiene products that permit menstruating girls to attend school on a regular basis. As reported by a rural woman:

Table 4. Case-control matched ($n = 69$) conditional logistic regression comparisons and odds ratios for well-being scales.

General scale	Specific scale	Parameter estimate	SE	Chi-Sq	Odds Ratio	Pr > ChiSq
Measures of social agency	Self-acceptance	-0.118	0.344	0.117	0.89	0.73
	Positive relations w/ others	0.693	0.340	4.163	2.00	0.04*
	Autonomy	-0.693	0.387	3.202	0.50	0.07
	Environmental mastery	0.833	0.379	4.835	2.30	0.03*
	Purpose in life	-0.435	0.387	1.266	0.65	0.26
Measures of hope	Personal growth	0.208	0.373	0.309	1.23	0.58
	Hope	0.965	0.415	5.396	2.63	0.02*
	Agency	0.847	0.398	4.523	2.33	0.03*
	Pathways	0.431	0.356	1.462	1.54	0.23

*Indicates a significance value of $p < 0.05$.

“My eldest daughter dropped out of school because of the many challenges she faced. Over time, I have been able to improve my relationship with her and I was able to convince her to go back to school and study hard. I feel that I am able to guide my children daily and now my third child, a son, is now also doing better. I don’t know if it could be this way before. I feel like I can guide my children and support their education.” (Widow, 50, small business owner)

In the area of health, women reported changes from a wide range of disorders and diseases. These included improved adherence to HIV medications for infected individuals, improvements in oral/dental health, and improved care for infectious as well as non-infectious diseases and injury. As stated by a widow left caring for her young children:

“With respect to health I learned that some diseases that are result of carelessness. I never used to use a mosquito net for my children or even myself. I kept treating malaria now and again. Since the training I become careful and the rate of sickness in my family has reduced.” (Widow, 44, small business owner)

The changes in economic conditions for those participating in the workshop resulted from increased awareness of money management and budgeting as well as improved relationships and interactions with those who were knowledgeable about potential small businesses. While there were no predetermined pathways to viable economic activities presented during the workshop, the discussion led individuals to seek out information from local NGOs and development organisations. One example was as follows:

“For many years I used to walk every day with bananas on my head to sell to the market in Migori which was more than 5 km away. At the end of the day, I never had more than 400 shillings in my pocket. With the women I met at the workshop I was encouraged to create a liquid soap business. I learned many things from this and my life changed a lot. I am now a trainer and I train people on how to make the liquid soap. The training woke me up and had become more active in how I handled things. My heart feels lighter.” (Married, 42, small business owner)

As a result of the staggering HIV epidemic in this region in the past decade, women are faced with significant trauma, loss, and isolation. The group format for the workshop allowed women to engage together and share their grief while looking to the future. The interviews revealed that building positive relationships was a central component to these women’s sense of hope and healing. In the area of relationships, one woman reported:

“After doing the training, I realised that I don’t have to be alone. I understood that in unity with others you have greater strength. Overall, my relationships have improved with others. I am better at managing my emotions, especially as I remember the death of my husband and my three children.” (Widow, 66, farmer)

A subset analysis of the qualitative interviews was done in an effort to examine changes over time using data from the matched pairing where qualitative interview data were complete (n pairs = 51). We examined three groups, (a) untrained ($n = 51$), (b) trained within four months ($n = 23$), and (c) trained more than four months ago ($n = 28$) (Figure 1). Four months was chosen as the cut-off as it was the median time since the participants had completed a workshop in this population. From Figure 1, we see that in each of the four content areas, individuals who participated in the workshop reported positive improvements compared with those who had never participated in the workshop. For three of the content areas, health, relationships, and economics, substantial improvements were seen within four months, with the greatest improvements in the area of relationships and economics. After four months, in the area of economics over 90% of those

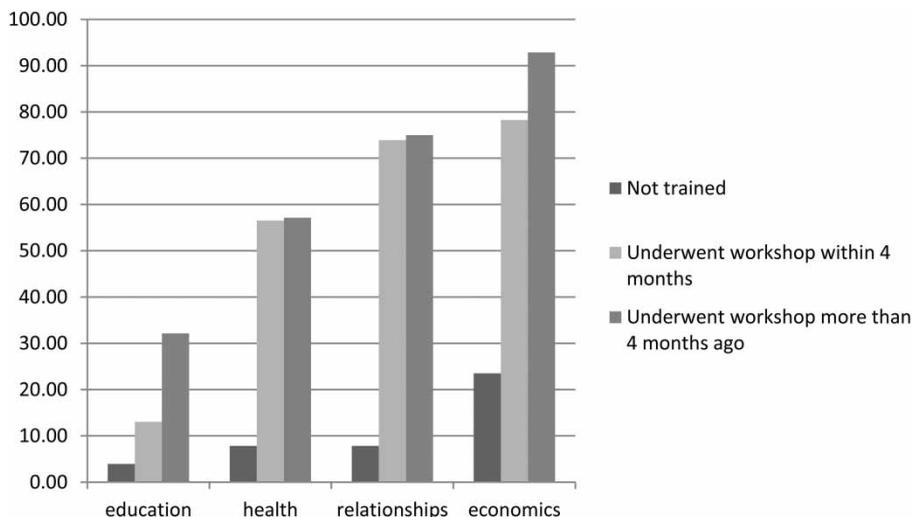


Figure 1. Percentage of individuals reporting improvements in education, health, relationships, and economics by participation in the Empowerment Workshop and time since participation.

trained reported some type of positive economic change, compared with less than 25% of those untrained. In the area of education it appears that significant positive changes are more likely to occur after four months; likely due to the fact that economic conditions generally have to improve first before expenditures for education can be made.

Study limitations

While strict standards of data collection were pursued, the data were obtained within the context of the existing programme implementation. There may be some selection bias that occurred in the initial selection of individuals participating in the workshop, although members of the self-help groups were encouraged to use a lottery system to select participants. There was no blinding of status within the population, both the interviewers and the participants were aware of who had obtained the intervention. There was spillover from this intervention as many of those individuals who had not yet participated in the Empowerment Workshop had mentioned they were knowledgeable about the workshop and its content. In some cases individuals reported that their interest in the workshop was a result of observing changes in others in the community. Despite these limitations, the significant difference in experience reported by trained individuals compared with untrained ones is promising.

Conclusion

Since the 1970s there has been increased recognition of the critical role of women in development that has led to concerted efforts to effectively engage women in development programming (Boserup 1970). The Beijing Conference in 1995 (UN 1995) brought together an agenda for global action to promote gender equality and empowerment of women that led to the inclusion of women's empowerment as the Millennium Development Goal 3 promoting gender equality by ending gender-related disparities in access to assets and allocation of developmental resources and services. These efforts coincided with the post (WHO 1978) activities calling for increased

community participation, thus veering away from one-sided technical expert driven development. This has resulted in the creation of targeted empowerment efforts geared to providing critical outer resources, such as access to health care, education, and opportunity expected to support essential advances in development. However, significant gaps remain in reaching both the stated Millennium Development Goals and the empowerment of women.

Part of the challenge lies in the definition of empowerment as there has been considerable debate on this topic, as noted in the review by Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender (2002). While we do not attempt to resolve this debate, we believe that the most pertinent definition is one that describes empowerment as an expansion of one's capacity to create positive behavioural change. Attitudes and beliefs are critical components to this process; however, it is through enhancements in individual capacity and decision-making leading to behaviour change that advancement in one's life can be achieved. Within the context of development activities, the discussion of empowerment requires greater recognition of the distinction between resource-based empowerment (such as skills, education, or opportunity) and agency-based empowerment (for example, programmes focused on self-efficacy, or intrinsic motivation) (Samman and Santos 2009). Human agency can be defined as the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power that is focused on their ability to formulate strategic choices and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes (Bandura 1986, 1999). Sen's seminal work in this area emphasises the importance of agency as an end in itself. He states that "*agency freedom is freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent decides he or she should achieve*" (Sen 1985), and this is considered to be a foundational means to other development outcomes (Sen 1999).

Many development interventions have focused on fostering collective action as a means of enhancing agency; and participation in women's groups are now globally widespread (Hickey and Mohan 2004). There is considerable literature on the link between agency and collective action (Blaxall 2007; Contreras-Arias et al. 2013; Evans and Nambair 2013; Pandolfelli, Meinzen-Dick, and Dohrn 2008) demonstrating how actions to solve community challenges, increase the flow of capital for women, and challenge social norms have improved the position and voice of women in these communities. While both intervention and control groups were drawn from the same pool of applicants, it could be argued that their level of individual agency was higher than for other women in the population. While the group experience may have increased their level of agency, the changes women reported and attributed to participating in this agency-based empowerment training as compared with others in their group is notable.

Nearly all behaviour change theories include the components of human agency, self-efficacy, and/or motivation as key elements necessary to facilitate behaviour change. The literature is replete with examples of how agency is required to create and promote development and positive health outcomes, yet little has been published on programmes specifically designed to foster this at the individual level. Few development initiatives are focused on fostering agency and even fewer have been empirically examined for their impacts. We suggest that this study demonstrates that an intervention that allows individuals to examine their life experience, identify goals, and provides them with the cognitive tools to move towards their goals can have considerable impact that leverages other interventions, including activities that promote collective action.

The lack of attention to programmes that directly foster agency at the individual level may be due to an underlying premise that basic needs, such as food, security, shelter, as described in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943), are a prerequisite focus of activities before needs in the higher levels (including self-actualisation) can act as motivators. While unfulfilled lower needs can dominate one's thinking and actions, is a prerequisite for increasing individual's awareness of their environment and cognitive processes more effective engagement and creation of solutions to address their basic needs.

Many behaviour change initiatives have programmes that are created and targeted at specific behaviours to be changed from the perspective of what activities and actions have been deemed important by the creators of the particular programme in question. These programmes channel the behaviour change messages towards individuals through informational exchange, social mobilisation, and social support. Rarely are individuals asked to identify what is important for themselves, their own lives, and their own goals.

The results of our evaluation of the IMAGINE programme provide evidence that facilitating human agency, a foundational component of empowerment, is not just possible, but is feasible and can be accomplished in a relatively short time with minimal costs. This enhanced agency can, in turn, catalyse participation in other development activities, leading to significantly more effective utilisation of existing opportunities and resources. Additionally, the combined focus on fostering individual agency and the group format that facilitates collaborative learning and leveraging existing relationships can result in substantial advancements in key areas of social and economic development.

The world is witnessing tremendous interconnectedness and information exchange that on the one hand provides a global view of development solutions, and on the other hand allows adaption and growth that is consistent with the local socio-cultural context. Building human resource capacity at its very core through the development of human agency is essential to allow individuals to learn to navigate and successfully adapt to this constantly changing environment. Moreover, grounding behaviour change in the context of individual life goals may likely maintain intrinsic motivation in the long run, allowing for appropriate audit and feedback, leading to continued positive learning. Identifying ways to build human agency that engender hope, self-efficacy, and positive behavioural change is requisite to women's empowerment. Individuals living in poverty or other dire circumstances may not have created those conditions, but they are the primary agents who must be engaged to change these circumstances for themselves and their society.

Disclosure statement

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