

EXPLORING SAVINGS CULTURE AMONG RURAL WOMEN IN KASHARI COUNTY, MBARARA DISTRICT

Annah Assiimwe Tibazindwa¹, Charles Mucunguzi²

^{1,2}(Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Mbarara, Uganda)

Corresponding author: Annah Assiimwe Tibazindwa

ABSTRACT-Rural women are among the most financially excluded populations in the world due to myriad formal and informal barriers to formal financial services. A lot of research has been conducted on promoting women's empowerment using microcredit in Uganda, but there has been little research on savings culture of rural women specifically in Kashari county, Mbarara district. This paper is part of the PhD study that addresses this gap through a qualitative study of women savings and investment groups in the seven sub-counties of Kashari in North western Mbarara. The results that form this paper point to a strong desire by rural women in Kashari County to plan for their future and the future of their family members through starting or joining savings groups to enhance family incomes. The study further reveals that women belong to three main categories of groups namely: self-help groups, savings groups, and savings and investment groups. Regardless of the nature of the saving and investments groups they belong in, their main goal is to inculcate the culture of saving and investing whatever little earning they get. Results further suggest that groups are largely informal and women prefer to remain as informal as possible, making them formal would subject them to paying taxes, be controlled by government bodies and subsequently make them lose their esteemed savings and profits. The paper concludes that savings culture among women through savings groups is a key ingredient towards sustainable empowerment of women in the 21st century. Much as there are no visible signs of equality, we argue that enhancement of savings culture through savings groups has given Kashari rural women the power to take control over their daily lives which hitherto was not the case.

Keywords –Savings culture, rural women, Kashari-Mbarara district, Uganda

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Hugh and Panneta (2010), the model of saving groups originated in Niger whereby groups made up of poor women regularly met on weekly basis, saved same amount of money, one-month loans were approved by the members, and all of the group's money was shared out equally at the end of an agreed-upon cycle (6–12 months after start-up). The amount shared was regularly timed to match with the period of the year when they badly needed cash. They elected members of the management committee annually, and all groups were guided by a constitution which they wrote and kept in the box. It is the same box where records of all transactions were kept but to a large extent, records were mainly based on memorization.

Today, there are many forms of saving groups, for instance, some groups keep ledgers, others still use memorization while others use passbooks. There are saving groups which allow members to save different amounts of money while others allow members to withdraw their savings any time they wish so. Besides, some groups allow members to access long term loans and are flexible on reimbursement. It is further noted that all these variations have emerged as a result of experiences and dynamics which have shaped the new trends (Hugh and Panneta, 2010).

Much as there are variations in the group savings, they share same principles and these include: (i) Groups are made up of self-selected individuals and range in size from 5 to 30 members, with an average of about 22 members. (ii) Members decide who joins the group. (iii) Groups elect their own management committee and money counters. No one else touches the group's money. (iv) Groups use lockable cash boxes to keep surplus cash and records. The cash box often has multiple locks, the keys to which are held by separate members. Key holders are usually appointed from among the membership. (v) Groups develop a set of rules, based on a template: a) It mandates regular elections, at least annually. b) It defines the role and authority of the

management committee. c) It describes the services that the group offers to its members, including terms and conditions of savings, lending, and insurance. (vi) Members save regularly at a frequency determined by the group, sometimes the same amount for everyone, sometimes different amounts. The amount saved ranges between \$0.10 and \$5.00. Some savings groups set the minimum amount to be saved as a “share value” and allow members to save more than one share at each meeting, up to a specified maximum (e.g., five shares). (vii) If the group’s rules permit members to withdraw their savings, they are normally withdrawn at face value; interest earned is retained by the savings group. (viii) Savings are used to capitalize a loan fund from which members can borrow. (ix) The loan conditions are set by the group; usually loan terms do not exceed three months. Monthly interest rates range 5–10 percent, but can be as low as 1 percent or as high as 20 percent. (x) The loan fund usually provides loans to individual members, but can also be used to fund group-based investments, such as grain trading or livestock rearing, so long as all of the members agree. (xi) Most groups share out all their money among the members, in proportion to the amount that each has saved, at intervals that are decided by the group, usually between 6 and 12 months. Some groups choose to roll over a proportion of their funds to the next cycle. (xii) Nearly all interest paid on loans (except for minor expenses) is returned to the member at the share-out. Returns on savings and assets (often the same thing) are in the 35–50 percent range. (xiii) Groups may choose to contribute to a social fund, which is a simple form of insurance to cover the costs of small emergencies. (xiv) Members are free to leave the group at any time, under terms that are decided by the group (Hugh and Panneta, 2010).

In Kenya, Nelson, (1995) found out that the Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAS) helped Women in the Mathare Valley by availing credit facilities. With these credit services, women were able to invest in many ventures. According to (Zaman, 2000), community-based saving groups lessens vulnerability through diversifying income earning sources. Three studies conducted in Peru, India and Zimbabwe revealed that, extending small loans to the poor people mainly women for income generating and self-employment had lessened vulnerability through diversifying income earning sources (ibid). Similarly, Micro save Africa (2001) confirms that community-based saving groups help members start income generating activities as evidenced from the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India that has helped people overcome the credit obstacle. SEWA members were helped to start garment handloom, embroidery, through mobilizing 1000 rupees an equivalent of 1dollar per month and lending each other. After four years, the women opened up SEWA bank. By 1989, the bank had 25,000 saving accounts and one million dollars in working capital with a repayment rate of 96%.

In Kenya still, women farmers pooled their land parcels and organized themselves to establish savings associations and to deal with stockists and traders. In this way, women were able to solve problems experienced in acquiring access to land, credit and information (Spring, 2000). An impressive example of achieving scale is the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), which was founded in 1972 in Ahmedabad, India. This started as a small membership organization for poor women working in the informal sector. Today, it has more than one million members in 14 districts across India and aims at organizing groups with regard to services, access to markets and fair treatment. Its largest cooperative is the SEWA Bank, which in 2007–08 had over 300 000 accounts with about US\$16.6 million in deposits.

Self-help groups have also proved to be an effective method for connecting women with financial institutions. Such groups may operate at the village level and typically require their members to meet regularly. Savings are collected from each member and either deposited in rural banks or loaned to other group members. After a group has demonstrated its capacity to repay loans, rural banks typically leverage the group’s savings and provide additional capital that group members may use for agricultural purposes (World Bank, FAO and IFAD, 2009). There is evidence that working through groups can help women retain control over the loans they receive and enhance the returns to investments in women-managed enterprises (Garikipati, 2008).

II. METHODS

This was qualitative study. The choice of this research approach was based on the fact that it favours analysis of the particularities of the study participants, their saving culture and experiences. The type of research design was exploratory, it was considered appropriate for this study because it helps in understanding the social phenomenon holistically.

A total sample size of 91 respondents participated in this study. This comprised of 70 women group members and their leadership, 07 Community Development Officers, one from each sub-county, 07 sub-county chiefs and 07 women councilors.

The study employed purposive sampling and respondent driven sampling which is conventionally called snowball sampling. Purposive sampling, as part of exploratory design (Dane, 2011), was preferred because of convenience, ease and availability of participants.

Data for this study was collected through in-depth interviews and document review methods and was analyzed and managed through thematic content analysis.

III. RESULTS

3.0 Introduction

This section entails findings on the nature and forms of women savings and investment groups. It also includes findings on conditions for membership acquisition; period of stay in a group; members' duties and responsibilities within the group; Overall functions of the women savings and investment groups; rationale for starting the savings and investment groups; Benefits derived from the savings and investment groups of Kashari County; Challenges faced within the Savings and investment groups; men's Position in the savings and investment culture of Kashari rural women; and visible cohesion and cracks between men and women due to the Women's groups success.

3.1 Nature and Forms of the Women Savings and Investment Groups

Women in Kashari belong to various savings and Investments groups which they voluntarily join to strengthen their savings and investment initiatives. A considerable section of women expressed a concern emphasising that it is through joining savings groups that they have realised their financial empowerment. Women felt that belonging to these groups implies that they are working in a collective approach and this solidarity has made them stronger in their financial capabilities. It is against that background that women saw the justification to be members of these groups. In an effort to understand the basics of starting these groups, the study first and foremost deemed it important to understand the different groups in Kashari County and their physical locations and the primary purpose for the formation of these groups. In a focus group discussion with the women from selected savings and investment groups in Bubare Sub County, participants observed below as thus:

We belong to various savings and investments groups. Some are just self-help groups, others are savings groups while other savings and investment group. However in all these women groups we are fully involved in investments. The future is uncertain for us as women we have to save and invest.

FGD, Women, Bubare, 2021

Women further intimated that their groups are largely informal and felt that any attempt to make them formal would capture their valued interests and they preferred to keep as possible informal. The study observed that since these women groups were informal and no records captured by any institutional authorities, it was important to conduct an inventory that would map them for purposes of documentation and thereby providing the reader with an opportunity to develop an image of their membership dynamics, location and purpose of formation within Kashari county, Mbarara district. Researcher tried as much as possible to obtain any information at the community development services coordination offices at the district and sub counties but couldn't obtain verified records of these groups. Using snowball/respondent driven sampling, the study was able to locate these groups whose members were included in the study.

The failure to obtain these records cannot squarely be blamed on the government offices but on the nature and forms of formation and operations of these women savings and investment groups. Most of them operate at a very low scale and they are not registered and are largely formed based on their own guidelines which are largely informal.

It was observed during the study that these groups feel safe to operate informally for fear of being taxed and controlled by government bodies shrinking their income bases and thus encroaching on their profits. Women complained that government programmes meant for women economic empowerment tend to benefit the better off women leaving the very vulnerable women to fend for themselves thus the motivation and purpose for forming their own informal women savings and investment groups.

Notable is that most of these groups were formed by the women with the aim of increasing their investment portfolios. Although at a micro level the savings and investment by these women is propelling them to levels of savings as most women attested. In other instances women pointed out that the pressure women face in their home regarding financial responsibilities propels them to start micro savings and investment projects. They further reasoned that men have left them with a lot responsibilities to cater for and these require a lot of finances. A section of members of some of these groups indicated that they started the investment groups because they are without husbands and as such the burden of taking care of their children made them start their groups. Other women pointed out that they started the groups because they also desired to be rich like most men and other women who had already began their investment groups. They felt that seeing their fellow women prosper after setting up business projects made them realise the need to start up their projects.

Some of the women's views are presented in the quotations below:

In our group most of us had various challenges in our homes which were the same at community level. We never had enough funds and in most cases as women we never had any opportunity to access money as individuals. We therefore only saw the opportunity in forming this association and indeed it has paid off a lot to us. *Study Participant Rwanyamahembe, 2021)*

While another woman further observed thus:

"Me as a woman I was really finding it difficult to save for the family on top of the little my husband

could bring on the table. This situation at home compelled me to join our savings group and ever since I have really transformed into a contributing woman in my household". (*Woman participant, Rubindi, 2021*)

And this woman below had an interesting situation in marital household:

I was having constant fights with my husband because he was a porter on building projects and he always referred to me as a lazy woman who is like a tick on his body. He would beat and I almost deserted my children and my home. Then my fellow woman who is also a neighbor convinced me to join their group and lent me money for membership fee. It has now been five years and I am contributing to the welfare of my household and surprisingly my husband has stopped beating me.

He has promised to go to my family and pay dowry and this has raised a lot of happiness to me. I will get my legal status in my marriage (*A woman study Participant from Bucuro, 2021*)

3.2 Conditions for Membership Acquisition

The study was further interested in establishing the various conditions and requirements for the women to acquire membership in these savings and investment groups and among these included; documentations such as National Identity cards, subscribing to the terms and conditions of the groups. Other conditions of joining the groups included; payment of membership dues. It was revealed that the fees range from 5,000/= to 400,000/= given the income potentials of the various women forming these groups. However it was observed that in some cases women are allowed to acquire membership even when they have funds below the minimum of Uganda Shillings, 5000/=. Women stated that they allow such women because of their levels of vulnerability and if left out those women will suffer much more. In such a scenario social capital becomes a ground upon which these women groups function. The spirit of empathy takes precedence over profit maximization. This approach among women savings and investments groups is evidenced to be beyond the formal savings and investments groups and as such the category of women that cannot afford minimum savings contributions are also brought on board and built and strengthened their potential to prosper.

It was also observed that these women are meant to pay their subscriptions and also timely because of their commitment to the groups they have formed. Study participants intimated that should members fail to pay their subscriptions they will have gone against the very reason why they started the investment group and thus failing to achieve their goal of economic and financial independence. In an FGD in Ruhumba, participants observed thus as below:

A member had to bring a photocopy of a national ID and a letter from chairperson LCI. A member had also to come with someone we clearly knew at the village for confirmation of her residence. A membership fee of 400,000/=, Agreement to terms and conditions of the group constitution and this is done after reading the constitution. A membership fee of 5,000/=, It was through application for one to be a group member, A member has to present a photocopy of the national identity card, Membership for 20,000/= Membership fee of 10,000/=, saving 10,000/= monthly. (*FGD, study participant, 2021*)

Further to that the women pointed out that members are expected to attend group meetings which are mainly once in a week and effect their weekly contributions and discuss issues of interest for further transformation of their group and any other challenges the groups face. In these meetings they will develop strategies for addressing challenges in a collective approach. Women emphasized that regular attendance of the groups meetings is aimed at ensuring strong ownership of the group and the feeling of "it is ours". Further to this the women asserted that they find it imperative to have a sense of ownership of these groups because they are the very people that started them up.

In another angle or dimension study participants held the view that conditions set up by themselves are a constant reminder to members to adhere to these principles in their day to day of the group's operations and auditing. The conditions in this context were said to act like mirrors in ensuring adherence to the operational guidelines of these groups. These conditions in this context were indicated to be helpful at the time of recovery of the loans extended to group members and thus minimizing default. One of the study participants pointed out as follows:

Some of these conditions have provided checks and balances and are good indicators for a member's commitment to the group. These conditions have acted as our mirrors. (*A member of a savings and investment group in Mutumo, 2021*)

Study participants pointed out that the other condition for joining the group is a recommendation from one of the existing group members who will ensure a thorough background check in order to avoid bringing on board people with questionable characters. In this case study participants emphasized that women can also be cunning and a good understanding of their background is paramount. Study participants presented various experiences regarding cases where new members brought challenges to the groups. Below are some of the captured cases:

We accept any member to join the group having been recommended by an existing

member of the group. (FGD, *Participants Kamushoko, 2021*)

In addition one participant observed thus:

I joined as a member of the group after satisfying all the requirements for admission in the group". The good thing some of these members knew me and relieved me of all requirements. (*Study participant, Mutumo, Kashari, 2021*)

In a nutshell conditions for joining the women savings and investment groups in Kashari County are not about the officially set guidelines but those of the groups which they follow strictly though there are some rare situations where certain members do not satisfy all the requirement because they are closely known by the existing members.

3.3 Period of stay in the Group

In this section the study discusses the period group members have spent within their respective groups. The essence of this analysis is to show how the time period relates with a number variables analysed in this research. These include; level of commitment in the group, history of borrowing implying default and record of payment, the volume of contributions and managerial or administrative and other responsibilities and the roles they play in the groups.

A section of women noted that they have stayed in their savings and investment groups for a period not less than five years. Others joined as early as 2010 and they have been committed members since then. A section pointed out that they are recent recruits within the groups and noted that they are less than 5 months members.

3.4 Members Duties and Responsibilities within the Group

The study was also interested in establishing the duties and responsibilities of members of these groups. Study participants mentioned multiple duties and responsibilities they play in the associations which they belong to.

Overall members were said to play key roles within the groups based on longevity in respect to membership. The longer the members have stayed in the group the more important roles and responsibilities they play in the management of the group's activities. Although this was a key observation members pointed out the holding a responsible position sometimes depends on a member's level of education especially when it comes to tasks like records keeping and calculation of profits and dividends at the end of a financial year of that particular group. Education level was also seen as a great factor in determining the interest rate and period of loan payment and additionally the defaults numbers and the volume of money defaulter hold in a particular group.

In addition to longevity in a group, the study further enquired about the roles and responsibilities of the members within the groups. Some members mentioned as being group advisors, auditors, chairpersons, treasurers and others being just members. Some of these women indicated that a section of women are just passive members while others are active and are also involved in the day to day running of the savings and investment groups. Although women had essential education requirements a section of women noted that running and managing these groups is a cumbersome task since most of these women's vulnerabilities are visualized in their low levels of education. The big task in this was pointed out as the burden of group leaders to provide financial explanations to members with less or no financial literacy or no formal education. It was in particular mentioned by the leaders that the less educated members of the group always accuse the fairly educated leaders as embezzling the group funds especially in times when the very leaders acquire any property. The claim usually that these leaders are misusing the groups funds.

Furthermore some members indicated that they are responsible for making sure the new members understand the qualifications members should have while others are responsible for establishing the background information about the new members. Thereafter the very members will inform the group about the intending member qualifications. Other members informed the study that they are responsible for advising the group on the risks they are likely to face by admitting the very members they suspect. The reasons they base on to be careful about a member include; the potential for default of membership subscription and in case of a loan and the member fails to pay. Some other members indicated that they are responsible for providing accountability of the funds the groups receive and the funds they extend to the members in form of loans. Members further pointed out that they are responsible for the overall incomes and expenditures of the groups.

Some members pointed out that they are responsible for ensuring confidentiality of members' personal information that includes; abilities to pay, payment histories and that some of the women join the groups without the knowledge of their spouses and other family members. Probed further as to why some women join the groups without the knowledge of their spouses, women revealed that some husbands don't want their wives to join these groups on the assumption that the women will be financially powerful and will not respect their husbands at home.

A section of women informed the study that they are responsible for lobbying for more funds from governments and other organisations that support women initiatives. They mentioned the funds from microfinance support

center, emyoga funds and the youth livelihoods funds since some of these women are still youths. In addition some women indicated that they are responsible for convening meetings for the groups.

Some women mentioned that they are responsible for keeping the secrets of the group members especially regarding money or difficult accounts acting as treasurers of these groups. Making sure the members converge at the meeting place in time. Lobbying for our savings group for funds and other help. Some of these women also meet with other groups for advice especially those groups that have been in operation compared to the newly formed ones. Overall members were said to play key roles within the groups based on longevity in respect to membership. The longer the members have stayed in the group the more important roles and responsibilities they play in the management of the group's activities. Although this was a key observation members pointed out the holding a responsible position sometimes depends on a member's level of education especially when it comes to tasks like records keeping and calculation of profits and dividends at the end of a financial year of that particular group. Education level was also seen as a great factor in determining the interest rate and period of loan payment and additionally the defaults numbers and the volume of money defaulter hold in a particular group.

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3.5 Overall Functions of the Women Savings and Investment Groups

Women mentioned that they collect, save and lend the money from women and at the end of the year they share the profits. They further pointed out that the groups give out loans to the group members and non-members at an interest rate of 5% monthly mostly across a good number of groups included in the study. For the case of non-members of the group, study participants indicated that a member in the savings group has to get a loan on her behalf. This was mentioned as purposely to ensure that non-members who are likely to default and the difficulties in the recovery of the money comply with groups lending terms and conditions. So a member who stands surety of the non-member pays the loan money plus interest in case of default. Total default will thus imply forfeiting of one's savings and be given the any balances after deducting the loan money.

Other women mentioned that within their groups they buy shares as group members and each member to get a loan which is usually less or equivalent to ones shares. They indicated that they give loans to group members at an interest of 2% on weekly basis. We give loans to our group members who put in an interest of 2%. Some women mentioned that they are involved in lobbying for their groups' support services especially when they are invited for workshops at the district and other organizations.

The other function that was mentioned involves undertaking other income generation activities such as purchase of chairs and tents which they hire out on events and occasions that take place in the community at a fee. They informed the study that they hire out chairs at a cost of 200 Uganda shillings per chair and the money is injected back into the savings group for a profit at the end of the year.

The other function that was mentioned by the women includes; support to the bereaved members for the loss of the very group members or their beloved ones and a sum of between 300,000/= and 370,000/= Uganda shillings is paid to the members. In another group women pointed out that when a member loses a beloved one from her family, as a group they contribute 120,000/= to help with the burial arrangements.

Study participants further indicated that they also provide catering services within the group members and people outside the group. They further explained that the group is hired and paid for the catering services provided. Further too women pointed out that they also have a common group store where each member contributes 2kgs of beans which are sold and the money is used to buy saucepans, cutlery, dishes and other catering utensils which are used during the hiring of catering services.

A section of women pointed out that they teach and sensitize women especially on how to handle finances to avoid unnecessary expenses. Other functions of the groups include; giving out to group members to pay school fees and to help them with other financial problems. In addition women mentioned that their groups are involved in bulls fattening. They buy and sell bulls at a profit after months of feeding. The profits are reinvested in the bulls business to increase the capital base of the savings and investments group.

3.6 Rationale for Starting the Savings and Investment Groups

The study was interested in analyzing the rationale behind the establishment of the women savings and investment groups in Kashari County. Some of the women observed that they started their saving group in order to support their husbands with school fees for their children as a way of sharing responsibilities. Others mentioned the desire to uplift the standards of women through savings and investment starting with the little savings they can mobilise while a section of women pointed out that they started the group to raise their voices as catholic women. Others were of the view that they started the group to lessen the challenge of women being isolated in community issues while one group intimated that they started their group in order to promote family hygiene in their households.

In other instances the study was informed that the reasons for forming the savings and investments groups was uncertainty women experience in marriages and as such women pointed that they form groups in anticipation of any failures in marriage so that they have a well cushioned landing after separation and divorce or abandonment. This level of preparedness was said to be a big fallback position as women emphasised that they have acquired properties in their names excluding their spouses and even have gone as far as investing in parents' home areas where in some instances women have put the acquired properties in the names of their biological siblings, parents and in other cases; in the names of their trusted friends.

Women reasoned that in the marriages there are a lot of risks where their husbands will take on other wives and end up sharing the properties they have sweated to accumulate. And as such women join women savings and investments groups to acquire a money to invest in the future they will have well planned.

In this study women reported that the other reason for joining the savings and investment group was their children who provide initial monies for subscriptions and continued capital accumulation in their groups. Women indicated that their working children provide the funds and the motivation to invest in these groups because of the readily available funds to invest. Some of the women indicated that the children have enough money to provide capital and are willing to continuously add more money in their mothers account until a time when the money has accumulated enough and the mothers can stand on their own. Some of the women were bold enough to say in many instances the fathers to these children are unaware of these plans between the children and their mothers. Although in bad spirit women reason that they keep these monies from the groups and have used the funds to bail out the family/households in emergency situations. Women further revealed that mostly these plans are between the mother and her daughters and their sons do not know.

3.7 Benefits derived from the Savings and Investment Groups of Kashari County

In any financial venture the primary aim of establishing a business is to maximize profits and as a result maximize benefits. Women savings and investments also were to have realised both tangible and intangible benefits out their hard earned profits from their investments. Benefits are a crucial factor for establishing a business investment and all controls are aimed at minimizing losses while maximizing benefits. In this study women mentioned a number of benefits they have obtained from their investments generated through their groups.

Women in one particular group pointed out that most of them do not have husbands and out of 20 members of the group only 5 women have husbands and as such the primary focus of starting the group was to help one another to look after their children. They said that they have so far managed to save and get fees for their children. They reasoned that they are helpless and yet children have to go to school. One participant from this group pointed out as thus:

I have a girl that has completed senior four and she has to join senior six. If I didn't have this group I wouldn't have educated my girl to this far. I have educated my children as a woman without a husband. This group has greatly contributed to this cause

Another study participant mentioned that she has educated her children to higher levels of education. "We have taken our children to school. Currently I have one graduate and two students at Mbarara University. We have gained knowledge through workshops as we get visitors from the district. *Study participant, 2021*

The other benefit from the savings groups was mentioned as finding it easy now for women without bankable securities to obtain a loan given the difficulties of getting loans from commercial lending institutions. They further stressed that as women they have saved money and thus promoting the women's saving culture. In addition women wanted to develop their fellow women since most of the women did not know procedures of how to get loans from banks. In such a scenario the option women had was to form their own savings groups and get loans at affordable interest. With their ability to save and provide affordable loans women expressed their gratitude in being able to access capital and invest in ventures they can manage without the fear of losing their investments. In this scenario women were optimistic that though the amount of money they borrow from their groups is still low, they contend that the money is meaningful and is with less and they are sure they can repay and still obtain dividends at the end of their own set financial years. A considerable section of women

indicated that they end their financial years in December and the main reason provided for this is that the month is the climax of celebrations of days like Christmas and the start of the New Year. With these remarkable investments women indicated that most women will be able to support their husbands and in addition in some instances the women pointed out that they are the only ones that provide for the family needs in these public holidays and merry making days.

The other benefit mentioned was that with the experience obtained from being members of the savings and investment groups, women are now able to advise fellow women on how to cope with difficult conditions looking after and nurturing children. Women asserted that they have since been able to educate their children since women carry more responsibilities in the home. Women in regard to these benefits noted that they have gotten catering equipment to help in case of functions and this has also helped us reduce in expenditures at household levels.

Women expressed gratitude that the loan monies they obtain, have been able to invest in personal business ventures while others have invested in banana plantations by applying manure and thus increase food production and be able to sell matooke for income within their households. Some of the women also indicated that they have been able to save and improve their family welfare by buying mattresses and beddings and household utensils and feel that their welfare has greatly improved.

More gratifying was that the women have been able to reduce the dependency burden on their husbands and have as in a consequence reduced marital disputes and violence. Women asserted that further to that have realised a stable and peaceful family because they are able share responsibilities with their husbands and the stress and pressure on men's financial burdens have reduced within the families. One of the study participant clearly asserted thus and indicated in her expression below:

We found out that waiting for a man to look after us and pay for everything was becoming difficult. We decided to start savings in order to cater for our families especially in emergencies for example when a child gets sick. To also grow and develop as women through savings. This is because as women we have limited income and we have to save the little funds we have so as to grow. To buy clothes for household members because it's not that whatever you want you will have to get it from the husband. The first time I got money from the group I bought two goats and currently I have six goats. I also started my retail shop after getting a loan from this group. This shop again helps me get money to pay back the borrowed money. I have also bought cups, plates (ebikwatobye'ka) and this has helped me because I could not buy them at once as they are very expensive *A 37 year old woman in Rwanyamahembe, 2021.*

Another notable benefit women derived from the savings and investment groups was indicated as developing strong social capital and networking as group members. They emphasized that apparently they know each other and they easily help themselves as group members. Beyond the funds women pointed out that they are able relate with women they felt were successful and now feel a strong connection because they have a stable income and have accumulated property and can also afford the basics of life. In this women reasoned that they feel their statuses in society have been elevated to better levels that they were before joining the savings and investment groups.

"I have as well gained personally and as a group as I don't pay or spend much especially in burial arrangements as members contribute". (*A 27 year old woman and a member of the savings group, 2021*)

Women felt that they envisage a better future because every day their incomes are increasing and their households are now seen as upcoming examples of progress in the societies a term they referred to as *entunguka and omurembe*¹. Women reasoned out that before joining these groups they were seen as of low class or status but progressively this mindset in their communities is increasingly changing as their investment profiles increase. They pointed out that they can afford a good diet, good clothing and because their children are now in better schools compared to before, respect and recognition is what they are realizing.

In addition women expressed gratitude that they have been able to pay back to God for the successes he has blessed them with and in this they reasoned they can pay tithe and contribute to welfare within their religious institutions. In the end women pointed out that they have spiritually grown because they are able to contribute towards the development of places of worship and as such they feel spiritual nourishment. However section of women were concerned that religious leaders are increasingly demanding a lot more contributions from pointing out to women that their current income statuses are a direct result of Gods intervention not matter the heavy burden they have in the repayment of group loans and increased family responsibilities. They further

¹Development and of current trend

contended that the heavy demands these institutions place on them may take them back to their earlier positions before they joined the savings and investments groups.

3.8 Challenges Faced within the Savings and Investments Groups

Given the overall benefits women have derived from the savings and investment groups, they have equally encountered challenges. One of the notable challenges reported was the failure by women pay back the loans in time. It was reported that quite often group leaders force the members who have defaulted to pay back the loan money and such members have end up exiting the groups. They not only stop at exiting but begin to tarnish the image of the group and join other groups.

The covid pandemic was said to have also escalated the problem of default. They pointed that the December period is when they share their money and profits and start the financial year afresh. However a number of groups that study participants were recruited from indicated that at the close of their financial years which normally take place in December women had not shared any money because most women had failed to pay the money they had borrowed and also the annual contributions.

I don't know whether it's because of poverty this year but we haven't shared yet in this December because women haven't paid. This could have been as a result of covid. Failure of members to bring money yet others need the money to use it. *FGD Study participants, 2021*

Another challenge reported by study participants was misunderstandings amongst the leaders of the groups which have weakened the savings and investment groups in Kashari women's community. The resultant effects of these misunderstandings have been failure to hold meetings and also by giving various unconvincing excuses of the losses groups have realised. Further reported was that these misunderstandings are because of poor leadership skills and greedy leaders who syphon money from the coffers of the group for their personal use. Members reported the reducing dividends at the end of the financial years because some of the members' monies cannot be accounted for by the responsible leaders. As a result group members reported that some of the women have lost interest and morale in the very groups they cherished.

Dishonesty among members of the group was also reported as a big challenge since members were reported as sometimes wanting share the money they have failed to save just using membership as a platform. Some women were reported as not giving money to members who have already contributed to their turns as a principle of the revolving fund.

In the worst cases some members were reported to engage in faking deaths of relatives in order for members to get the bereavement funds. Study participants indicated that this practice though not frequent some group members were said to have lied about their family members who were alive but reported as having died.

One of the benefits earlier reported was investment in bulls fattening and goat multiplier business whose capital is from group and individual loans from their own savings and investment groups. However study participants reported limited land in terms of space to graze the goats and to carry out other projects. Further reported was that goats and bulls projects require a lot of financial inputs such as need drugs and other veterinary services like consultations and treatment charges. These charges were reported to be encroaching on the profits from the projects and sometimes presenting challenges at the time of paying the loan money.

Study participants further noted that diseases are affecting the bulls resulting in death and yet some of this money is borrowed from government money which they have to pay back. One other challenge the groups mentioned were the fake drugs used to spray cows in order to control ticks and other farm inputs on the market and as such the ticks and other diseases were said to have thus continued to kill their bulls and goats.

The other notable challenge women reported was increasing competition from other groups. It was reported that groups keep mushrooming and they all invest in the same business ventures given the market potential in the area being limited. Notable investments most groups engage in include the hire of tents, saucepans, plates and cups in events within the communities. These groups were reported have ended up trying to outcompete each other by lowering hire prices thus falling low in the profits ladder. Groups were said to have a low business vision most of them focusing on similar investments which diminish the chances of success.

Goats and bulls fattening ventures were reported to be outcompeted by the famers who operate at an individual basis and also mentioned in this regard was that Kashari is largely livestock farming community and these individual farmers have large capital that overshadows the investment potentials of women groups. Individual farmers were said to make business decisions compared to groups which first have to go through bureaucratic processes. As a result these groups cannot make prompt decisions to survive in a highly competitive business environment.

Group members were much concerned and worried that women are increasingly debt burden with numerous cases of multiple borrowing. The women were said to have developed a habit of subscribing to numerous savings and investments groups. When these women obtain a loan from one group and fail to pay, they again borrow from another group to service the loan from the previous group. As such these women have been report to be entangled in a cyclical web of borrowing not to invest but to repay the loans. In the end these categories of women have been said to have lost their properties, to have made their guarantors love their share

monies as they are forced to pay for the loan defaulters. There were also reported cases of women running away from their communities after failing to pay the loans they obtained from their savings and investments groups.

The above scenario defeats the very reason why they these women joined the savings and invest groups. Multiple borrowing was also reported to emanate from women who borrow as a result pressure from their husbands and in some cases lovers/partners who insist on their wives to borrow money and pass the money to their husbands and misuse the money without putting it in meaningful investments. In other instances for the similar reasons women's husbands were said to obtain loans elsewhere and force their wives to borrow from their groups and eventually women shoulder the burden of paying back the loan monies they never invested. In order to offset that burden women ending borrowing from other groups and multiple borrowing becomes a chronic situation.

In other instances women reported that a good number of women borrow for non-income generating activities and on occasions such as weddings, baptism and birthday parties among others. These ventures were said by women to be luxuries of life which many women and surprisingly rural women have recently indulged in which have resulted in dire consequences for women in savings and investment groups.

Although not widely mentioned except by a few women, it was reported as an issue increasingly becoming common for women to invest money borrowed from the savings groups and invested in the prayers of harvest. A term a section of the study participants called the scenario sowing seeds in churches in anticipation of reaping a big harvest. A number of born again churches/places of worship were singled out as duping women to bring the borrowed money for blessings before investing it in businesses. In this case it was reported that these women are demanded to apportion a percentage to God and invest the rest of the money and that God will bless their harvests. Some of these women were reported to be convinced to believe in this falsehood and as a result they end up losing the borrowed money to the religious leaders.

A section of women brought an issue of women who have ventured into politics. These women were said to have borrowed money to fund their political activities especially during election time. The cost of election was said to have drained women into lots of expenditures on borrowed money and after elections they fail to pay and in some cases they delay to pay and the interest keeps accumulating. In some cases these women were reported to sometimes and being in key leadership positions within the group to borrow from the group a number of times and sometimes without the knowledge of the group members. In most cases these women fail to pay and sometimes pass over the cost to the entire group in inflated expenditures thus putting a strong financial burden to the groups' money.

Direct embezzlement of the group's money to finance group leaders' personal issues was reported to be a common challenge within the women savings and investments groups. The rationale for outright theft of the money was given as the level of illiteracy of group members who rest all their trust in these leaders. The study further asserted that by the time members realise the losses, the amount of monies lost will have accumulated to greater magnitudes and they can't recover it.

3.9 Men's Position in the Savings and Investments Culture of Kashari Rural Women

Although not intended by the study women kept pointing out the role of men in their savings and investment groups. In some instances women pointed out that their husbands are increasingly supporting their wives savings and investments ventures. They reasoned that men are appreciating the efforts of women in providing tangible relief for the household welfare. They further reasoned that even in some cases men lend women money to pay their loans. The men were said to provide technical advice and assistance to women in their livestock investment projects since traditionally men tend to be more knowledgeable in livestock farming. In addition men were said to provide free farmland for women's goat and bull fattening projects. While in other instances men allow women to integrate their goats and bulls within the main family herd which is under the overall management of the men.

Men were further said to allow women to be away when they are engaged in their group activities and tasks such as going on exchange visits. Men were said to take care of family responsibilities in the absence of the women. These responsibilities were said be among others care for the children, attention to some of the domestic animals such as goats, chicken and sheep which women tend to take care of.

Men were reported to provide finance advice to women especially in investment decisions. Women pointed out that these decisions are not dictated upon women by men. In case women do not agree men were said to agree with the women. Women expressed their appreciation with the supportive roles of men regarding their savings and investment initiatives.

However women indicated that their husbands are blocking their initiatives to save and invest. In some cases women revealed that their husbands have forced them abandon their groups on the assumption that they are learning bad manners from the bad women in those groups. Other men were said to be insecure that once the women are economically empowered they will be difficult to handle in the homes. Women felt that men stop their opportunities for prosperity.

Men were reported to be concerned that the moment women get money men's influence in the family will dwindle followed by their respect. As such women expressed their concern that men are a stumbling block from their performance in women savings and investment groups because they feel inferior the moment women become financially emancipated.

3.10 Visible Cohesion and Cracks between Men and Women Due to the Womens Groups Success

The study realised that as women's incomes and investment profiles increase families have become stronger in welfare as well as increased tensions between men and women in their households and even in their relationships. In the sections below the thesis presents and discusses study findings regarding those visibilities in families and partner relationships.

3.10.1 Strengthened Union between Men and Women due to Women Saving Groups Success

In certain instances study participants reported that as a results of increased incomes family stability has been realised since women contribute to family welfare and over care of the children. Women further reported that previously men were overburdened with all the financial responsibilities as women were just observing without any financial contributions to their husbands and/or partners. A section of study participants observed that some women currently care for their husbands and/or partners when it was the opposite in the past and that women feel high with gratitude to care for the men they loved and produced children with. Even those still in a relation that is not marriage feel happy to cater for would be husbands to the women.

IV. CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that women involvement in savings groups enhances the culture of saving, it increases ownership of assets, leads to improvement in decision making power at home, and above all increases their financial independence. We further conclude that savings culture among women through savings groups is a key ingredient towards sustainable empowerment of women in the 21st century. Much as there are no visible signs of equality, we argue that enhancement of savings culture through savings groups has given Kashari rural women the power to take control over their daily lives which hitherto was not the case.

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*Corresponding author: Annah Assiimwe Tibazindwa

¹(Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Mbarara Uganda)