Gender Analysis of Village Savings and Loan Association and its Community Development Implication in Anambra State

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Abstract
Women's empowerment is a slow and incremental process, in which VSL can play a crucial role. To understand the impact of gender relations on VSLA interventions, and vice-versa, focusing on the perceptions of men and women participating in VSLA, household decision-making, and women's access and control of VSLA resources, this paper focused on gender analysis of VSLA within communities in Awka North and Ayamelum LGA of Anambra states. The study consists of primary qualitative research with 400 participants (291 women and 109 men) in six intervention communities; Omor, Igbakwu, Ifite Ogwari, Mgbakwu, Ebenebe, and Amanuke. The analysis was focused on examining the influence of gender dynamics on VSLA, and VSLA on gender dynamics, relating to the woman herself, her household, the intervention, and the wider communities in Anambra State. VSLAs are considered a cost-effective means of promoting household resilience by increasing participants' asset base, allowing them the credit to enter productive markets, and reducing their vulnerability to shocks and hazards by allowing them access to credit in times of emergency. The research methodology used focus group discussion and Key format interview and has gone ahead to explore the research findings starting with the woman herself, her status, and gender relations. It also examines her role and influence in the household, specifically in household decision-making. The paper also examined the intervention itself, VSLA's positive outcomes, and barriers to women's participation. It also looked at the wider community and women's role in community leadership. The paper also concluded with some strategies and recommendations to promote gender equality through VSLAs.

Keywords: ***VSLA, Gender, Community development***

Introduction:

Gender role in development is one of the most important areas of Community development "Gender" refers to the roles, responsibilities, attributes, and power relations that are socially constructed by and assigned to men and women of a given society or community. These constructs vary greatly by culture, geographic region, socioeconomic status, and context, and they change over time. Perceptions of gender are deeply rooted, vary widely both within and between cultures, and change over time. But in all cultures, gender determines power and resources for females and males. Gender and community development is a process towards sustainable way of community development incorporating all the gender with equal participation and involvement

A Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) is a group of people who collectively support a structured process for saving money and offering loans at a local level. It is a community-based initiative whereby the members of the group democratically prepare their own constitution for how the VSLA will be managed and the rules for members to abide by. VSLAs provide a simple and accountable system for savings and loans for communities who do not have ready access to formal financial services such as banks or microfinance institutions.

This paper focused on gender analysis on Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA) and its community development implication. Although activities of VSLA, however, tends to be rooted in assumption and anecdote, with little empirical evidence indicating the real impacts that VSLs have on household and community gender dynamics and vice-versa. This report aims to unpack some of the assumptions about the gendered impacts of VSLA within Ayamelum LGA based on primary data gathered in 6 communities.

VSLAs are thought to play a critical role in bringing financial services to rural areas of developing countries, where access to formal financial services is typically very limited. However, VSLAs can also be a platform for addressing the social norms that sustain gender inequality, and can therefore also contribute to the wider and more complex processes of community development.

Women all over the world have been challenging and changing many gender inequalities since the beginning of history. These struggles have not been supported by many men who have not been outraged at injustice against women.

Man is by nature an independent social being and cannot develop, actualize and objectify himself through labor in isolation from others and from the social environment (Mbah, 2005). Men have to interact with others to live well and to achieve more meaningful sustainable socio-economic development. The relationship between men and women has for a long time been marked by the subordination of one group to the whims and caprices of another. Women's position being relegated to the background and placed in a dependency position makes it almost difficult if not impossible for them to take their own decision on issues and problems to affect them more especially on reproductive health. According to the United Nations Millennium Campaignto reduce world poverty by the year 2015, women work two-thirds of the world's working hours. The overwhelming majority of the labor that sustains life-growing food, cooking, raising children, caring for the elderly, maintaining a house, and hauling water is done by women, and universally this work is accorded low status and with little or no pay. The ceaseless cycle of labor rarely shows up in the economic analysis of a society's product and value.
VSLAs provide a unique platform for trust and solidarity among women which are the foundation on which to build participation. Evidence shows how VSLAs have contributed to significant increases in household income and improvements in food security, health status, children's access to education and women participation

Objective of the Study
The objective of this study was to
To examine the influence of gender dynamics on VSLA, and VSLA on gender dynamics, relating to the woman herself, her household, the intervention, and the wider communities in Anambra State.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Concept of Village Savings and Loan

The Foundation for International Community Assistance (FINCA) was the pioneers of the concept of village savings which is nonprofit organization with specialty in rural credit found in U.S. and was the most practiced kind of Community-Managed Loan Fund (CMLF). Since then, village banking has been adopted by NGOs and social groups in many part of the world and has been successfully reached poor setups of rural occupants. Although village saving is usually facilitated via grants given by a lending institution; member savings, share capital and accumulated interests replaces external funding in the long run (Scoones, 2009). Savings mobilization is a major element of this method than it is in the Grameen and Latin American Solidarity Group models. For members to qualify for a loan, they are required to have saving with village bank and to also keep on saving with it during the entire loan cycle so as sustain livelihood strategies in case of emergencies. A noted criticism of the village banking model however is the rarity of reaching self-sufficiency since demand for credit rapidly expand as compared to their capacity to marshal savings (Robinson, 2001).

The Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) is a form of The Accumulating Savings and Credit Association (ASCA) developed by Cooperative Association and Relief Everywhere (CARE) and was first initiated in the Niger Republic in 1991 as a saving and credit intervention program that has gained increased popularity in developing countries around the world due to its impact on the rural poor, especially on the household income and family well-being. The VSL model has spread to at least 73 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with over 12 million active participants worldwide. Thus, VSLA models intend to provide the very poor with savings services as well as insurance and credit that can be delivered with minimum cost, provide a secure place to save, the opportunity to borrow modest amounts, easy to understand and transparent in its operations.

A Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) is a group of people who meet regularly to save together and take small loans from those savings. The activities of the group run in cycles of one year, after which the accumulated savings and the loan profits are distributed back to the members. The purpose of a VSLA is to provide simple savings and loan facilities in a community that does not have easy access to formal financial services.

A VSLA is a transparent, democratic and structured version of the informal Savings Groups found in many parts of the developing world. The VSL methodology emphasizes accountable governance, standard procedures and simple accounting that everyone can understand and trust.

Concept of Organizational Structure

Groups hold annual elections. The responsibilities of the five-person management committee are clearly defined. This is to protect the group from being dominated by a single individual. Each group is composed of 10 to 25 self-selected individuals. Groups meet weekly and members save through the purchase of shares. The price of a share is decided by the group. At each meeting, every member must buy between 1 and 5 shares.

The share price is set by the group at the beginning of the annual cycle and is fixed for that cycle.

Savings

The system is very simple, but the result is powerful.

Members do not have to save in equal amounts; these can vary at each meeting. Additionally, by saving more frequently in very small amounts, they can build their savings more easily, contributing to improving the security of the household.

Loans

Savings are deposited to a loan fund from which members can borrow in small amounts, up to three times the value of their savings. Loans are for a maximum period of three months and may be repaid in flexible installments at a monthly service charge determined by the group. This flexible repayment system is a decisive advantage when compared to the rigid repayment demands of MFIs.

Social Fund

A VSLA may decide to have a social fund, which is a simple form of insurance. Everyone pays the same amount at each meeting. The Social Fund is used to pay expenses in the case of personal emergencies

Annual Share-out (Credit)

At the end of every annual cycle, all of the loans are paid back and the total money is shared out among members in proportion to their savings. This share-out includes all of the profits of the group from interest income and fines. Any member who wants to can then plough this money immediately back into the group, so that they start a new cycle with a large balance, which makes them quickly eligible for a large loan

Concept of Credit

Credit is defined as the ability to obtain title to and receive goods for use in the present, although payment is to be made in a further date. Credit has been given several and varying number of meanings, some people refer to it as loans while others use the term “borrow” to qualify credit. Pischie (2003), defines credit as a loanable fund which permits the purchasing of goods and services in the present based upon the promise to pay at sometimes in the future. Olayide (2011), define credit as a monetary or financial aspect of capital resources; capital resources being broadly defined as goods employed and necessarily used up to the course of production which can take the form of money in cash or bank overdrafts.

Credit has been viewed to be a loanable fund, an asset or financial reserve and finally a monetary aspect of capital resources which members of VSLA can call upon when needed, necessarily to be used up in the course of production, greater agricultural yield, and for other members personal productive business and so on.

Review of Empirical Studies

The World Bank’s Gender Impact Evaluation Database (2020) examined that conflict-affected women in Côte d’Ivoire have experienced high levels of gender-based violence. The two-armed research evaluation aimed to identify effective and scalable interventions for the prevention and response to gender-based violence and to evaluate the impact of a socio-economic program and discussion group on the incidence of physical and sexual violence and women’s individual agency. The research project is based on the hypothesis that compared to participation in a Village Savings and Loan Association (VLSA) only group, participation in a VSLA + Gender Dialogue Group led to a greater increase in women's individual agency and decision-making ability that improved her economic independence and decrease her vulnerability to violence. As a result, it is expected that there will be a beneficial impact on her family and community. The specific research objectives are as follows: 1) To assess the incremental impact of Gender Dialogue Groups added to the VSLA program on a) Economic independence; b) Experiences of physical and sexual violence; c) Household decision-making; and d) Gender attitudes. 2) To explore qualitatively the process and potential pathways by which the different programmatic approaches might influence levels of violence, economic independence, and decision-making. Overall, the findings illustrate that the addition of gender dialogue groups (GDGs) to economic programming only, reduced violence against women, although the majority of findings were not statistically significant. Increases in empowerment, financial autonomy, gender-equitable attitudes, and household decision-making were also noted among those that participated in VSLA + GDGs. There was no statistically significant increase in economic well-being, as measured by consumption and assessment, with the addition of the GDGs. However, these economic changes were not expected given that both arms received the VSLA component, although pre/post differences do indicate overall economic benefits. Qualitative findings suggest that GDGs were an acceptable approach to engaging men and women to improve shared decision-making, communication, mutual respect, and gender norms while offering economic benefits to the woman and her household.

Feed the Future program (2020) research team carried out a study on the Gender Assessment of Rural Women in VSLA in Ghana's Northern and Upper East Region, capturing information through a review of relevant internal documents, consultations with project staff, key informant interviews with relevant stakeholders, and focus group discussions with female VSLA members under and over 30 years of age. Study results show that both younger and older women successfully expanded their on-and off-farm productive activities because of VSLA membership and that VSLAs serve as an effective platform for members to access diverse market system stakeholders. Relationships developed through VSLA membership appear to positively impact women's confidence-building business opportunities. Key findings include: 1, Access to cash enables women to improve their farming practices. 2, VSLA membership expands production opportunities for women of all ages. 3, Women have broader access to information and services. 4, Market system stakeholders are motivated to work with female VSLA members. 5, Women VSLA members, particularly youth, are increasingly engaging in beyond-production activities. 6, Women group members are sharing best practices and other information.

WALA/USAID/CRS (2014). This gender study explores women's participation and leadership in savings groups (SGs) in the context of an integrated five-year USAID-funded Development Food Aid Program (DFAP), entitled Wellness and Agriculture for Life Advancement (WALA) (2009–2014) in the southern region of Malawi. The WALA program is implemented by a nine-member consortium led by Catholic Relief Services (CRS). The study serves to understand to what extent WALA-supported SGs advance women's meaningful empowerment and deeper long-lasting changes to gender power inequalities. The report presents the research design methodologies, analysis and key findings, and recommendations for action.

The primary research was conducted in November 2013 in two WALA-targeted districts, Thyolo and Chikwawa. A total of 259 WALA-targeted community members, program staff, and community agents (188 women and 71 men) participated in interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) using gender-sensitive qualitative and participatory methodologies. Analysis of results used primary and secondary sources and a gender and social relations lens. The findings showed that Dynamic gender norms, ideals, and practices influence women's and men's self and collective identities, relationships

Methodology

The research methodology used focus group discussion and Key format interview**.** All data used for the analysis was qualitative data.

Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) were held with various groups including female VSLA members, husbands of female VSLA members and male members, and community committee leaders, including Community leaders (Igwe), president and Secretaries of community Youth Leasers and women leaders in the Ayamelum LGA of Anambra state.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs**)** were also conducted with Community Based organization staff, Primary Health Centers Officials, Community leaders and Village Agents (VAs) to gain a broader perspective on the positive or negative effects the program has had, as well as to gain insight into views on women in leadership positions within the community.

A total of six communities were visited with total of 400 people (291 women and 109 men) were interviewed. Responses to questions were recorded on instrument templates, with direct quotes taken where possible.

Research participant numbers, disaggregated by gender

	KIIS		FGDs		Total		Total #
Communities	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Females**	**Male**	**Female**	**Reached**
Igbakwu	3	6	15	50	18	68	86
Omor	2	5	8	28	10	43	53
IfiteOgwari	1	4	25	24	26	38	64
Mgbakwu	2	4	20	28	22	52	74
Ebenebe	1	3	19	34	20	42	62
Amanuke	0	3	13	30	13	48	61
	9	25	100	194	109	291	400

Analysis and Discussion.

The analysis was rooted in both feminist 'Gender and Development' (GAD) and 'Capabilities Approach' frameworks. GAD philosophy focuses on "constructed social relations and power structures, and endeavors to contest the subjugation of women through the redistribution of power"[1]Structural GAD feminists view power in terms of a "system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women[i] Through GAD philosophy, inequalities observed throughout this research, including the inability of women to own land, the gendered division of labor, the positioning of women as dependent on men, and women's exclusion from decision-making processes, can be seen to reinforce the status quo and reproduce the economic and social structures that allow the masculine to dominate and restrict women to the private sphere.

The analysis also drew heavily on the Capabilities Approach to development, which views development as "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy" 'Empowerment' was a term used frequently by participants throughout the research process. From a Capabilities perspective, empowerment is the "real freedom or opportunities each [person] ha[s] available to choose and to achieve what she valued"

Empowered women, in this case, are not just having their basic needs met, but have the freedom and opportunities to live the type of life that they choose. The work of Robeyns (2007)[5]provided a Capabilities framework for examining the barriers that block women from true 'economic empowerment'.

Analysis and Discussion on impact of gender dynamics on VSLA

The focus of the discussion is on the impact of gender dynamics on VSLA interventions and vice-versa focusing on the perceptions of men and women participating in VSLA, household decision-making and women's access and control of VSLA resources. The discussion comprised;

1. Identification of the most relevant and effective activities of the VSLA methods contributing to positive and/or negative changes to women's status and gender relations.
2. Analysis of the household decision-making power relations and the roles of women that would enhance influence over decision-making related to VSLA resources, services, and opportunities.
3. Exploration of the most critical barriers for women to access, use, and control VSLA resources, opportunities, and services at multiple levels of agency, relationship, and structure.
4. Analysis of the most significant positive and negative results and outcomes of women's participation and leadership in VSLA groups.

The discussion took a progressive approach starting with the **woman herself**, then looking at her influence within **her household**. Also examined was the positive impacts of **VSLA and the barriers preventing her access to, use, and control of intervention benefits**. The analysis will conclude by exploring **her role in leadership** within the wider community.

The Woman: Women are supported as wives and mothers, with VSLAs providing a space for status change. Women and men in every community reinforced the position of men as 'providers' and women as 'receivers'. When women are seen to provide through VSLA-related business activities, it can be emasculating and threatening to men's sense of themselves.

Some women and men expressed deep distrust in the opposite sex when discussing how men and women use money differently. This leads both men and women to want sole control of VSL resources, reducing the likelihood that husbands and wives will engage in meaningful joint negotiations on how to use VSLA resources.

On the other hand, VSLA can also play a positive role in relationships. Women and men described how VSLAs improve the relationship between husbands and wives. In working together for the betterment of their family through VSLA, couples draw closer and develop a sense of shared purpose.

Women feel a sense of community within VSLA groups that supports them in transgressing societal gender norms and expectations. Many women relied on each other for support in withstanding community disapproval and censure. In this way, women are creating their own communities, in which their status is measured in different ways, such as by how much money they make in business, etc. VSLA, therefore, creates a space in which women can wear different identities, which are measured by different norms.

The Woman: In Summary

Gender roles are very clearly defined in communities with women's status tied closely to their role as homemakers. Men are providers, and tradition dictates that women should remain reliant on them. VSLAs can disrupt the status quo, by making women less dependent on men, which can be resisted by men and communities. In situations where men's position as the household head is not threatened, VSLAs are welcomed and can reduce household tension resulting in more harmonious relationships. VSLAs have the potential to be transformative by providing a supportive space in which women build support networks and gain strength from each other, allowing them to better withstand community disapproval.

Households" Intra household decision: Men dominate decision-making, but women's influence is increasing. In the communities visited, women reported low levels of decision-making power in their households. But with their participation in VSLA, small decisions relating to cooking and buying small food items have been increased. Although important decisions, such as building a house are still made by their husbands. Although women make up the majority of VSLA members, a large proportion of the women interviewed, in all six communities, receive their share of money from their husbands. Women act as proxy members for their husbands who contribute to shares and claim dividends. Men have a final say in the decision to take loans from the VSLA group, and there is also an expectation that Women still have little power to make decisions about their family's livelihood and future. However, their increased contribution to household income through VSLA, and being aware of the amount of dividend coming into the house, in some cases allows them to influence their husbands' decisions in small ways, even if they do not have the final say.

The Household: In summary

Women have increased control over small decisions relating to food and the kitchen, while men retain control over larger decisions. Men's contribution to a VSLA woman's shares gives him control over her dividend. Men are perceived to be better decision-makers than women and are influenced strongly by the opinions of the wider community. Women use subtle persuasion to influence decision-making and increased knowledge of household income gained through VSLA gives her the power to suggest.

A Gender Gap Analysis conducted by Widows and Orphans Empowerment Organization LOPIN2 Project in Anambra, Imo, Akwa Ibom, and Rivers 2016 found similar findings to those for women in USAID LOPIN 2 project VSLA groups tended to be dependent on their husbands for contributions, tended to have little control over loans they take, and tended not to have ownership of assets purchased with loans.

The Intervention: Positive outcomes of VSLA participation and barriers for women to access, use and control VSLA resources and opportunities:

VSLA participation has had positive outcomes for women in all the communities sampled. They have acquired assets such as farming inputs, livestock, food, clothes, housing materials and school expenses through their membership. Some have invested in productive assets such as rental businesses to increase earnings, and some have registered the VSLA groups into cooperative societies. Women have a greater sense of financial independence and have started to think in a more 'long-term' way, through saving and planning.

Women all reported the need to get permission from their husbands to join VSLA, with husbands' jealousy cited as a significant barrier to VSLA participation, limiting women's ability to travel long distances and engage in business. Women are expected to put their responsibilities to the home first, with their business seen as a 'side thing'.

The risk of ridicule and gossip acts as a deterrent for both men and women to challenge accepted norms. Women members of VSLAs have to put up with considerable speculation and gossip from other community members. Through VSLAs, they have developed support structures to deal with these pressures and seem to draw strength from each other as a group.

The Intervention: In Summary

Through VSLA, women have increased assets, are better able to support their families, and have increased confidence and a sense of financial independence. VSLA encourages them to save and helps them access other interventions in the communities.

Barriers to participation in VSLA exist, with some women prevented from joining VSLA by their husbands. Women VSLA members also experience barriers to their use and control of VSLA opportunities and resources. Normative barriers include the positioning of men as providers and women as a receiver, with certain Income Generating Activities (IGAs) being considered appropriate for women, and others for men. Communities use gossip and ridicule as tools to police these norms. Stereotypes such as the belief that men are stronger, or that businesswomen are promiscuous also limit women's potential to engage in business and fully exploit the opportunities provided by VSLA. Women have internalized identities conforming to gender norms, which make them feel inferior to men. Structural inequalities in institutions such as markets and customary law also restrict women from equal control of VSLA resources and opportunities.

The Community: Women's participation in Community Leadership

Communities acknowledge that women can make good leaders. However, male leadership is the norm in all communities. Discussions are dominated by men, and ideas suggested by women are only taken on board after being reinforced or supported by men. Both male and female champions can have important roles in promoting women's leadership.

VSLA has had a very positive influence on developing leadership skills in women, and perceptions of women as leaders. The ability to manage time and money in the long term learned through VSLA, is recognized and valued at a community level. VSLA groups also provide a platform for women to gain experience in speaking in a public forum, which encourages input at higher-level committees. VSL helps women move into the public space, taking on community issues while still maintaining the home and family.

The Community: In Summary

Women are under-represented in community governance. A lack of confidence, illiteracy, and 'time poverty' all act as barriers to committee membership. When women are represented on committees, they tend to contribute less than men, and their ideas are considered less valid. Women who are active in the community risk ridicule and gossip for engaging in what is considered a 'male space'. VSLAs can support women as leaders by helping them support their families, ensuring community approval and freeing them to engage in community issues. VSLA members also improve their leadership skills in public speaking and planning.

Conclusion

Gender differentiation in VSLAs affect transformational change within communities because of some gender norms by which inequalities are entrenched. VSLAs have an extremely positive effect on women's lives. It supports them to meet their basic needs, helps them to plan for the future, and acts as a supportive community. VSLs should be paired with specific interventions that directly address the prescriptive gender roles and unequal power dynamics that exist in communities. By reinforcing women's private sphere responsibilities, financial autonomy, and sense of self, and by supporting women to develop in the public sphere as leaders and businesswomen, VSLAs provide a starting point for community transformation.

VSLAs make a start by giving women more autonomy within their homes and providing a space in which they can express themselves, and measure themselves against different norms and feminine identities. VSLAs support women in longer-term thinking and allow them to be more vocal in public forums. VSLAs familiarize communities, and women themselves, with the idea that women can lead. When paired with interventions, such as those suggested in the section above, that directly address the prescriptive gender roles and unequal power dynamics in communities, VSLAs can contribute to positive societal change, transforming communities in the long run term.

Recommendations

In order to maintain the positive impact of Village Savings and Loan Association in the development of communities; while maximizing their transformative potential towards closing the gaps in gender inequality include;

1. *Conducting gender sensitivity training* to unpack and explore the traditional roles of men and women, engaging of men as partners to prevent 'push-back' against the economic and social empowerment of women through VSLA.
2. *Skills trainings that transgress 'gendered industries'* in productive skills to support men and women to move past 'buying and selling' and allow them to manufacture goods themselves. This training should not reinforce traditional gender roles around what are appropriate IGAs for women and for men.
3. *Conducting a gendered market analysis* to identify the industries in which women are active and those from which women are structurally excluded, exploring channels through which women can enter.
4. *Encourage VSLAs to be 'transformative spaces'* in which women can question norms and challenge stereotypes. Building group identities and strengthening social bonds can be encouraged through celebrations at share-out, and group activities that promote bonding.

5. *Recruiting Male Champions to* promote female participation in community leadership. By ‘inviting’ women’s perspectives into leadership forums, male champions can begin to bridge the gap between closed and claimed spaces.
6. *Promoting female role models:* Exposing women to the experiences and stories of successful Malawian businesswomen will provide women with ideas and strategies to promote their engagement in business.

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