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Abstract

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Keywords

livelihood improvement; phenomenology; women's empowerment

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Abstract

Numerous studies support the role of improved agricultural practices in reducing poverty, and because much of the agricultural labor in lesser-developed countries (LDCs) is that of smallholder women farmers, many International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) are implementing programs for these women. The United Nations prioritized gender equality and women's empowerment in the Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030) and encouraged governments and other actors, such as INGOs, to do the same. However, little qualitative research has been done to study the effectiveness of INGOs regarding women's empowerment through improvements in their agricultural practices. This study was conducted to develop a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of women in an INGO's empowerment program. The study's theoretical perspective conjoined critical and feminist theories. Twelve beneficiaries of the INGO Field of Hope's projects in northern Uganda were interviewed. The responses were analyzed to develop four themes and 12 subthemes to understand their experiences and distill the phenomenon's essence. We recommend that more research be done to assess which INGO practices encourage empowerment over dependency and whether such projects increase agricultural productivity.

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Introduction/Review of Literature

By empowering women in lesser-developed countries (LDCs), many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), strive to improve their livelihoods and stimulate national economies. In 2010, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) accounted for one-third of the world's worst poverty (The World Bank, 2013). Seventy percent of the world's poorest people lived in rural areas and depended on agriculture for their livelihoods, and about one-half of those suffering from hunger were farming families (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO] of the United Nations, 2014; Olinto et al., 2013). Along with its higher prevalence in rural areas, poverty was and remains more common among women.

Empowering Women through Agriculture

Gender equality is one of the United Nations' (2017) 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the world to achieve by 2030. Women's empowerment, and, subsequently, their equality, has long been a topic at the forefront of societal change and it dominates much of today's global conversation regarding development. An *empowerment agenda* supports the "rise of participatory approaches to development and often mean[s] working with women at the community level building organizational skills" (Momsen, 2004, p. 14). Empowerment is a developmental process aiming to instill women with self-esteem and self-confidence to aid them in decision-making and in acquiring the skills needed to live productively (Momsen, 2004).

Moser explained empowerment as "'giving women the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources'" (as cited in Osirim, 2001, p. 168). It should be noted, however, that empowerment cannot occur with only women involved, but rather as a collaboration between women and men. Mosedale (2005) explained that empowerment must consider "the ways in which power relations between the sexes are constructed and maintained" (p. 244).

Empowering women in the agricultural sector could be highly impactful because of its significance to the economies of SSA nations (FAO, 2011; Lecoutere, 2017; O'Sullivan et al., 2014; The World Bank, 2016; USAID, 2015). In SSA, women make up more than 50.0% of the labor force in agriculture but only own approximately 20.0% of the land (FAO, 2014). The FAO (2011) reported that women, given equal opportunities to resources compared to men, could increase their farming yields from 20.0% to 30.0%, and raise the agricultural output of LDCs by 2.5% to 4.0%. Considering that food demand in SSA is expected to increase more than 50.0% by 2030, the need for increased productivity creates an even greater demand on the region's women farmers regarding their future yields (Kanté et al., 2013; Mukembo et al., 2017; Yeboah et al., 2018).

Women, however, frequently suffer from limited access to inputs, including seed, credit, extension services, and other resources compared to men, which negatively impacts their abilities to produce food and thrive economically (FAO, 2014). More than 1.3 billion women lack access to bank accounts with no way to gain or develop credit, and many face the reality of not receiving loans crucial to those in agriculture and the already financially troubled (UN Women, 2014). This marginalization often places women at an economic disadvantage (Ben-Ari, 2014).

A U.S. government-funded food security initiative, Feed the Future, developed the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) to "track the change in women's empowerment levels that occurs as a direct or indirect result of interventions" (Alkire et al., 2013, p. 2). This tool is used to analyze women's empowerment and gender parity. To measure empowerment, the WEAI examines five domains: production, resources, income, leadership, and

time (Alkire et al., 2013). The domains assist in measuring empowerment and provide comprehensive and beneficial criteria for doing that. Each gives voice to the challenges faced by impoverished and disempowered women. In a pilot study using the WEAI, it was found that women in four districts of Uganda were most disempowered in terms of “access to and decisions on credit, group member[ship], workload, [and] leisure” (Alkire et al., 2013, p. 11). The index highlights important factors to consider if seeking to empower women as farmers and agribusiness entrepreneurs in LDCs.

This montage of challenges opens doors for organizations to enter communities and provide a variety of assistance to women such as microfinancing opportunities (Otero, 1999) and the development of cooperatives (Lecoutere, 2017). Both microfinancing and cooperatives are popular in Uganda. Field of Hope (2020a) employs such while prioritizing women’s empowerment through agricultural development. The INGO focuses on rural northern Uganda, the nation’s most impoverished and agriculturally dependent region (Ali et al., 2015; The World Bank, 2016).

The INGO Field of Hope’s Work in Uganda

Field of Hope (2020a) is a not-for-profit INGO started originally to help meet the need for agricultural training in northern Uganda. Within the scope of their Victory Outreach Ministries Agricultural Program, Field of Hope (2020a) mobilizes groups of women in the rural districts surrounding Lira, Uganda. Through these groups, it sponsors trainings on agricultural practices and proper Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) services, lending, and operational practices. By forming cooperatives and participating in VSLAs, the women “have access to small loans at reduced interest rates to purchase inputs and equipment. At the end of the saving period . . . women receive the money they have saved, plus the interest earned” (Field of Hope, 2020b, para. 6). On one occasion, the INGO also sponsored tractor plowing of the women’s fields.

As an INGO, Field of Hope (2020a) operates from the United States and relies on a Ugandan coordinator employed by their church partner to coordinate activities in the country. Over time, it established a relationship with another agricultural training organization. At the time of the study, through this affiliation, Field of Hope (2020a) had gained access to trainers on agricultural and financial literacy. This team assisted in planning and delivering the INGO’s smallholder women farmers’ program, including multiple projects through its outreach efforts. Because little research had been done to examine its beneficiaries’ experiences, a study was warranted to understand their *lived experiences* regarding the empowerment intended to result from the INGO’s projects in Uganda.

Purpose and Objectives

The study’s purpose was to explore and derive meaning from the shared experiences of women participants in an empowerment training program in Uganda, including agripreneurship opportunities. This phenomenological study sought to examine the impact of these opportunities on the women’s livelihoods and their communities. Two research objectives guided the study: 1) describe the women’s *lived experiences* with the empowerment opportunities provided by the INGO Field of Hope in northern Uganda; and 2) distill the *essence* of the women’s *lived experiences* regarding their interactions with the INGO Field of Hope.

Theoretical Perspective/Phenomenology

A blend of two theories was used to guide this study. Critical theory was the foundational perspective and augmented by feminist theory. The theories' primary foci on human relationships and social interactions supported using such a lens in this inquiry. According to Fay, critical theory is "concerned with empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender" (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 29). This study explored the women's power relations within their participant groups, households, and communities after involvement with the INGO, Field of Hope.

The goal of critical inquiry is to "critique and challenge, to transform, and to analyze [relationships]" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 59). As a result, actions could be taken to increase the effectiveness of the INGO's program and, thereby, further empower their beneficiaries. We intended to report on what the INGO could improve, explicate what they were doing well, and describe how the women viewed the organization so Field of Hope could more effectively achieve its objectives in the future. Feminist theory is rooted in critical theory and intersectionality. It questions "the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 28), which informs understanding. We aimed to provide *deep* and *rich description* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the women's experiences with the INGO's empowerment program. The two theories formed the study's theoretical lens.

Phenomenology is the "study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses" (Patton, 2015, p. 116). This approach was used to capture a *deep understanding* (Creswell & Poth, 2016) of what the women involved in the INGO's empowerment program experienced, and how they described and understood such, i.e., to distill the phenomenon's *essence* (Moustakas, 1994). *Essences* "enrich and clarify our knowledge and experience of everyday situations, events, and relationships" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 48) and are the "ultimate in understanding [a phenomenon]" (p. 51).

Methods

Tracy (2010) asserted that "high quality qualitative methodological research is marked by (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence" (p. 839). This study was guided by these criteria. Based on the relevance of women's empowerment within the United Nation's (2017) SDGs, the study's phenomenon was relevant, timely, and significant. To achieve *sincerity*, Tracy (2010) recommended self-reflexivity and transparency, which we disclosed. *Credibility* implies "research marked by thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling; triangulation or crystallization; multivocality; member reflections" (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). We maintained such through deep research and inquiry, as well as effectively communicating the study's methods and results. This inquiry aimed to influence INGOs/NGOs operating within the sphere of women's empowerment by giving voice to their beneficiaries' experiences, which addressed Tracy's (2010) call for *resonance*. Scant evidence existed in the literature examining the experiences of beneficiaries of women's empowerment programs in Uganda calibrated to improve their agricultural productivity; as such, this study is a *significant contribution* (Tracy, 2010) to understanding this phenomenon.

To ensure respect and ethical practices while working with the interviewees and the INGO's partners, appropriate exiting procedures were followed, including sharing the study's findings (Tracy, 2010). The inquiry was approved by the Institutional Review Board at

Oklahoma State University. It connected literature, theoretical perspectives, research practices, results, interpretations, and discussion to explore the phenomenon and establish *meaningful coherence* (Tracy, 2010). Peer debriefing increased the likelihood of our findings being credible and trustworthy (Spall, 1998). Peers involved in the debriefing included three doctoral graduates with experience in international agricultural development and qualitative research. *Bracketing* was also used to “mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the [study’s] rigor” (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 81).

Researchers’ Reflexivity

The lead researcher’s social position was that of a white, female U.S. citizen, aged 23 who held a bachelor’s degree in agricultural communications at the time of the study. She had experience with non-profit organizations through her mother’s work in U.S. rural housing development. Agriculture was an interest due to her ranching background and experiences in youth programs. Her views on women’s equality and experiences with female role models added perspective to this inquiry. She interned with Field of Hope from July 2017 to May 2018. The other researchers were either full-time or adjunct faculty members at the lead researcher’s university and represented agricultural education and agricultural economics. All had traveled to Uganda to work with entrepreneurs on issues of food security, including women, and had visited its northern region. Two had taught and mentored Ugandan graduate students.

Group of Interviewees

The study’s participants were selected based on the suggestions of key informants (Rogers, 2003) knowledgeable of Field of Hope’s (2020a) projects in northern Uganda. They included Field of Hope’s Ugandan coordinator, district coordinators who organize groups and interact with the coordinator, church pastors who aid in communication among groups and coordinators, and chairpersons of the women’s groups. For two groups, the chairpersons shared the opportunity to be interviewed and several women volunteered. In the other groups, a key informant asked potential interviewees to participate. In all, 12 women volunteered, three from each district (see Table 1) within Field of Hope’s service reach. All were active in a VSLA group and had participated in the INGO’s programming since its inception in 2015. Ten farmed seven or fewer acres, one had nine acres, and another cultivated 20 acres. Two owned some land ($4 \leq$ acres), but most shared ownership with husbands or farmed land belonging to male relatives.

Table 1
Selected Personal Characteristics of the Study Participants

Pseudo-name	District	Age	Est. Yearly Income (UGX) ^a	Years of School ^{b,c,d}	Self-Reported Literacy ^e	Children/Dependents ^f	Marital Status
Woman 1	Amolatar	63	300,000	S4 ^b	Both	4/6	Widow
Woman 2	Amolatar	32	200,000-1,000,000	P6 ^c	Some	3/5	Married
Woman 3	Amolatar	64	5,000,000	P7 ^c	Some	4/7	Married
Woman 4	Apac	52	150,000	P5 ^c	Yes, native	6/4	Married

Woman 5	Apac	35	200,000	S1 ^b	Read, little write	4/1	Single
Woman 6	Apac	56	1,190,000	P7 ^c	Some	5	Single
Woman 7	Alebtong	47	10,000,000	S6 ^b	Yes	6/4	Married
Woman 8	Alebtong	46	200,000	S2 ^b	Yes	6/2	Married
Woman 9	Alebtong	28	500,000	S1 ^b + V ^d	Both	4	Married
Woman 10	Dokolo	47	1,000,000	P7 ^c	Both	13/17	Married
Woman 11	Dokolo	29	250,000	P7 ^c + 3V ^d	Both	2	Married
Woman 12	Dokolo	48	1,200,000	P5 ^c	Both	9/5	Married

Note. ^a\$1.00 USD = 3,706.10 UGX at time of the study. ^bSecondary school. ^cPrimary school. ^dVocational school. ^e“Both” or “yes” denotes the woman’s ability to write and read; “some” denotes the woman’s lack of confidence in her ability to write or read; “native” refers to the native language of the region, Luo. ^fDependents includes grandchildren, orphans within the family or community, or young adults needing financial assistance.

Instrumentation, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

The study’s semi-structured interviews were conducted during August of 2017 as guided by 25 open-ended questions we developed. The interview protocol avoided asking directly about empowerment but instead inquired regarding indicators of it, such as economic independence or income, land ownership, agricultural production, education, resources, time, and leadership (Alkire et al., 2013; Osirim, 2001). The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy, and the lead researcher kept a journal during the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Eleven of the women relied on a translator to interview in Luo, the local language. Woman 7 was fluent in English and asked to be interviewed in such. The study’s translator was a Ugandan male in his late 20s. He was recommended by the INGO’s Ugandan coordinator. The translator was fluent in English and Luo and had an agricultural background, but he lacked experience with the INGO, which reduced the potential for him biasing the translated responses. He translated in the third person (Edwards, 1998) and the lead researcher transcribed those interviews demonstrating that voice. We acknowledge that the translator’s gender and social class may have influenced the women’s responses due to cultural dynamics and norms.

By compiling transcripts of the interviews coupled with the lead researcher’s reflections and observations, an understanding of the women’s lived experiences was constructed (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). The findings were reviewed for “‘significant statements,’ sentences, or quotes” (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 79) to provide an understanding of how the women interpreted their lived experiences with Field of Hope. These data were transformed into clusters of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994) for analysis through coding. Open coding was done to “understand how [the] data might relate to broader conceptual issues” (Yin, 2016, p. 196). Next, codes were categorized into parts, or themes, i.e., axial coding, illuminating recurring patterns across the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The lead researcher recorded her assumptions and memoed to note connections (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016) and to “reflect on the larger thoughts presented in the data” (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 188).

By using themes derived from the axial coding and memo writing, theoretical statements or tentative schemes were developed representing the “significance of interpretations and conclusions in relation to the literature and previous studies” (Yin, 2016, p. 199). Other researchers familiar with these methods also reviewed the codes and derived themes. We discussed and negotiated our mutual analyses to arrive at a thematic portrayal of the women’s lived experiences.

Results

Our analysis of the interviews yielded 33 codes from which four major themes and 12 subthemes emerged. We assessed the prevalence of themes by determining how many responses supported such (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses by eight or more women related to each theme.

Theme #1: Securing their children’s futures through education

The women were concerned for their children’s futures and the need to provide them with high-quality education. Women 7 described her greatest achievement in the previous five years: I have been able to pay my children’s fees. . . . when soya is good, I am going to sell it now, and I’m going to pay their tuitions, pay their fees, and improve our livelihoods . . . our main focus now is for the children to live and study. To have a good life

Many expressed a deep responsibility to secure their children’s education. Woman 5 said: “She wants the life of her kids to be improved through studies by the money she will get through digging and through farming so that they will have [a] better future.” The women also described the difficulty of relying on farming to pay school fees, especially with uncertain rainfall. They shared, however, what a great help the VSLA had been by lending them money for the fees if needed.

Belief that a better future for their children is directly related to education. Momsen (2004) reported that, although the parents typically have lower levels of education, many impoverished families view education to be directly related to more successful lives removed from poverty. To this point, Woman 12 said: “[O]ne thing she would like to change is so that those kids should put all their attention on studies, so that all the way, their life can get changed.” Woman 3’s beliefs were similar, especially for her daughters: “. . . [before] girls weren’t allowed to go to school [past P7], but, this time, her girls are going to school so they will have better life – more than her.”

Burden and responsibility of paying school fees. To ensure that education transpires, school fees must be paid. For many, this is a large undertaking and an expensive challenge always at the forefront of their minds. Woman 9 decried: “The challenges is studies. She wants the kids to go to [a] good school, and now the good school demands much money, and they do not have. So that’s the greatest challenge.” Woman 8’s comments harmonized with this position: “All the money she has been getting she has been using to pay school fees. So, the biggest challenge she’s had was paying school fees.” On occasions, they sold produce at undesirable times to put their children in school. Woman 10 also described this burden: “The greatest challenge is paying school fees. . . . [If] they don’t have a good market, yet the school is demanding them to pay – so it is a big struggle in their life.” For many women, only a few of their children attended school, while others stayed home due to the lack of funds. The daughters were typically kept home because their education was not deemed as important as that of sons (FAO, 2011; Momsen, 2004; The World Bank, 2013).

Theme #2: Empowerment and improved livelihoods as a result of INGO participation

Osirim (2001) explained empowerment as “psychological well-being, self-esteem, self-respect, and autonomy coupled with the striving for or achievement of economic independence” (p. 169). The five subthemes within this broad theme explored the women’s feelings of empowerment and experience of improved livelihoods.

Development of self-esteem. Woman 7 recognized that Field of Hope had helped them to realize their abilities as women: “. . . we [group members] tell them a few things about how they can keep their homes well, how they can keep their families. . . . and we can help our husbands to raise our homes, to make our families well.” Woman 9 attested to more self-confidence: “[N]ow they are bold – they can even speak in public in front of a hundred people. They can speak freely. And when you [white people] come, they fear you, but they can talk to you.”

Gender equity and inclusiveness. When speaking about empowerment through equality, inclusivity was important; therefore, Field of Hope worked to involve men if the group so chose. In this instance, husbands of the women were invited to join the groups, and many found that this helped encourage their wives to participate. Along with this inclusivity was an embracing of members from all socioeconomic classes and religious backgrounds. Woman 8 described this: “. . . without differentiating the denomination, where you come from, but getting all of them together from different localities and work them together so they can unify themselves and get ideas from one another. . . .” Despite the strong ties to religious preferences and church families in Uganda, many of the women were members of churches other than Field of Hope’s partner. Woman 9, a Catholic, said that the group “brought them together. It has helped them to know people they used to not know; it has helped them to unite together” despite their religious differences.

Building community. This lack of discrimination attested to building community. Woman 12 spoke of the others as friends. She said: “[Field of Hope] has given her a company with friends. . . . Field of Hope has helped people come together in savings, and now people are growing together. . . . [Her favorite thing] is staying in one accord, in unity.” Woman 8 shared that bringing the women into community with one another was a “very good achievement.” She also said: “Field of Hope has brought them together. That has enabled them to have unity.”

Economic empowerment. Regarding this subtheme, many women described the INGO’s contributions to improvements in their incomes whether through the savings scheme or their increased agricultural yields. One woman told her story of producing enough yield of sunflowers to afford purchasing better seed for the next planting season and producing enough from that crop to build a new kitchen. Woman 2, who attributed their increase in yields and incomes to the agricultural trainings, expressed: “Because Field of Hope has taught them to plow or plant seeds, it has enabled them to get high[er] income.” Woman 7 explained: “We are encouraged and have hope now. It has affected our lives so much and just improving our income in agriculture.” The testaments support the *economic empowerment* described by Osirim (2001). Woman 11 also recognized a difference in her life because of Field of Hope: “Now that she’s in the group, she has more money. . . . they have savings here. You [can] come and borrow and use and step-up the business and then come back and bring the money.” Improved money management was also described. Woman 6 shared: “Before, she did not know how to keep money, but now she can keep money. It has improved her skills, and now she can think right [about finances].”

Improved agricultural practices. Economic empowerment also could be seen through the

women's agricultural practices. They had experienced increased yields by applying improved farming practices and the use of better-quality inputs. Woman 7 made this point:

Field of Hope has . . . taught us many things – how to use land, how to have best crops, when to know that your crop is ready or when your crops are not yet ready. . . . [It] has made our knowledge about agriculture wider now, wider than before.

One practice repeatedly mentioned was broadcasting seeds versus planting in rows, which they noticed immediately improved their yields. Woman 4 said: “. . . what she learned from Field of Hope is a better method of farming. She used to just cast seeds, but . . . Field of Hope comes and taught her how to plant seeds in rows, the yield is improving.” Woman 10 elaborated further: “Planting seeds, they used to cast, but now, they plant them in rows. . . . [and] find out they have a good yield.” Field of Hope also provided tractor plowing prior to one planting season. It sponsored the tractor, and the women's group paid for the fuel. This made an impact on them. Woman 11 said that it more than doubled her yield: “[W]hen Field of Hope gave them [the service of a] tractor, the maize, they used to get like seven sacks. That year was doubled, and they got 18 sacks within a single season.”

Theme #3: Further aspirations for improved quality of life

Although the women described economic improvements through the INGO's empowerment projects, they also discussed desires for more change and even better livelihoods. Each woman, in some way, expressed a need or desire for more assistance to further raise their socioeconomic levels such as more training, funding, and farming inputs.

Need for greater income generation. The women had ideas to encourage more income by better marketing of produce and training for other vocations and businesses. These expressions were related to their need for more funds to pay school fees and purchase amenities. Woman 2 explained: “. . . Field of Hope could help them to raise their level of income, it would help them to save for their kids, for schooling, and help them for their health.” They also desired to acquire agribusiness training. Woman 2 said: “[T]hey should add on the skills of farming and how to do business . . . how to get a market for their goods and how to sell it.” Woman 9 elaborated: “. . . [other ways] Field of Hope should help them is how to maintain their crops and sell their crops. . . . they should be trained how to work with the cooperative society, thereby, when they plant a crop they can sell together.”

Many women also discussed the possibility of businesses other than farming. As Woman 1 described, they experience a long dry season with insufficient rainfall to support crops, so little farming occurs. During this period, families must survive on the income and production of their previous planting season. Woman 4 also wanted another business to help her family. She said: “Five years coming, she would [hope to] have something that could help her family . . . some business when she is out from home she can come and do after farming.” She further said that as she ages farming is more difficult, so “she wants something that she could be sitting down and sell because her age is growing older. That thing would help her.” Some ideas mentioned were baking bread, tailoring clothes, pottery making, or owning shops in the village such as a bicycle repair shop.

Need for additional agricultural inputs. To further increase their farming productivity, the women articulated a great demand for more agricultural inputs. Woman 1 stressed: “. . . they highly need those things, like fertilizer, seeds, [and] trainings . . . so they can also improve their lives.” Woman 5 expressed that “Field of Hope should help her with tools, seeds that can help her to farm well, and change her life.” And Woman 2 described a desire to farm more land to

increase production. Along with inputs, mechanization would also help. Many women expressed interests in tractor plowing after witnessing what Field of Hope had partially funded; they perceived that their group owning a tractor would be helpful. Woman 12 rationalized: “Giving us what to plow with [would help], our own, so that they can use it at any time.” Woman 11 also stressed the need for tractor plowing: “. . . when they plow the garden locally using their hands . . . the depth is just also as small as this, so planting, the plant root cannot enter, penetrate and go deep. . . . It [the plant] does not grow well.”

In addition, the women requested help in post-harvest handling – mostly storage so they could keep their produce safe while waiting for better prices. Woman 10 clarified this view: “. . . also the challenge they have is storage. So, if they could get somewhere where they could have the produce stored together, it could help them get to good markets and not waste money.” Woman 7 explained further: “Maybe they could train us on how to make good storage. How to store the cereals. When they come out of the garden sometimes they are cereals . . . but how to store them.” Woman 5 also stressed that a machine to assist in agro-processing would be helpful.

Theme #4: Ongoing challenges

Three subthemes explicated the theme of *ongoing challenges*. Although these obstacles may not be resolved or entirely overcome, Field of Hope and other NGOs, whether international or local, should be aware of these issues to effectively serve their beneficiaries.

Climate and weather volatility. One challenge especially pertinent in northern Uganda is weather unpredictability. This was a sensitive topic during the interviews due to a recent drought. The unreliable rainfall often hampered the women’s farming enterprises, and thus their annual incomes. Woman 7 explained: “The first challenge is in the drought. Sometimes we don’t get what we expect. Like last season we plant[ed] six acres, but we only get five bags because the drought had been so hard from January to June.” Woman 1 described the INGO’s response to the drought: “. . . in early this year still famine [existed] because there was a lot of drought, so Field of Hope provided them with posho and beans.” (Posho is a traditional food made by boiling maize or cassava flour in water.) The droughts left many unsure of how to manage their crops. Woman 5 decried the difficulty: “Unfortunately this last season, there was drought and not everyone plant[ed], and it was actually hard for everyone to know what advice to give each other.”

Access to and affordability of healthcare. The women lived great distances from amenities, including healthcare. Many traveled more than one hour to a health clinic and faced the challenge of unreliable transport to reach it. In cases of emergencies, this can be catastrophic. Woman 12 shared a desire to have her own vehicle to provide carriage to hospitals. Her home is approximately a 20 km walk to a taxi station and the hospital an additional 40-minute ride. She explained: “So, she would like also to, if possible, she could have transport, so whenever there is someone that is sick or something happened, that person can be rushed to the hospital immediately. . . .” And Woman 2 said: “Sometimes sickness is a surprise. Then, the challenges they have when this sickness comes, they look around and there is no other income they can take.”

Fear of abandonment by the INGO. The women had worked with Field of Hope for two years, forming a reliance on their services and relationship which left them fearing the project’s end. This can be attributed to their perceptions of improvement through the INGO’s programs, but also to their desires for further empowerment and self-improvement. Woman 3 wished for the INGO to stay: “. . . they should keep on coming to them to encourage them and give them

skills so that they can go up.” The women repeatedly mentioned the impact of the INGO’s “encouragement.” They expressed fear through feelings such as love and affection. Woman 6 said: “[S]he loves Field of Hope, they want them to come back to them always, and [give] plan[s] and whatever they bring for them is welcomed; they will be happy with it.” Woman 7 expressed her wish for ongoing support: “. . . I wish they would not leave us, they would continue with us, until they bring us out of the state we are in.” Woman 5 expanded that to include the community: “. . . people in the community will look at them, and come with them, and they will make a bigger group in the society and the lives of people will be changed.” And some women expressed a fear of abandonment once they were too old to farm.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Analysis and interpretation of the study’s interviews revealed four emergent themes and 12 subthemes. The theme of *securing children’s futures through education* refers to the concern the women had about putting their children in school. Most of the women interviewed only achieved a primary level of education or some secondary schooling (see Table 1). The related subthemes displayed the women’s insistence on their children attending school to ensure they have a *better future* compared to their parents, which included the requirement to pay school fees.

The theme *empowerment and improved livelihoods as a result of INGO participation* indicated the women’s positive reactions to their involvement. The subtheme *developing self-esteem* indicated the women’s increasing self-confidence and self-empowerment, and pride of participating in financial decision-making and keeping their families well. The subtheme *gender equity and inclusiveness* is related to the involvement of males in the program’s groups, not as threats to the women’s empowerment but rather as encouragers and supporters. The women also mentioned the differences among the groups’ members, such as religion, tribal heritage, age, and background, but emphasized the unity and relationships formed despite their differences. The subtheme *building community* reflected the women’s feelings of belonging and harmonious accord with other group members. They openly encouraged one another and counted on all members to participate for the groups’ betterment. The subtheme *economic empowerment* emanated from the increases in crop yields experienced, and the convenience and benefits of related savings they relied on during *hard times*. The women used the extra money to construct outdoor kitchens and to buy better seed for the next planting season.

The theme *further aspirations for improved quality of life* revealed the women’s desires to achieve more financially and materially in the future. Although the women recognized the improvements already made, they articulated needs for additional progress to reach a higher socioeconomic status and greater financial security. The subtheme *need for greater income generation* supports the theme because many women discussed alternative ways to increase their incomes and how Field of Hope could help. The women described skills such as marketing of garden produce and additional vocational training. Many worried about when they could not physically labor as much and the uncertainty of their incomes. The subtheme *need for additional agricultural inputs* indicated their desires for more efficient inputs of higher quality such as improved seeds and fertilizer, mechanized plowing, methods of post-harvest storage, and access to more land.

The theme *ongoing challenges* accentuated the women’s persistent problems. A subtheme *climate and weather volatility* expresses the persistent issue of drought and climate

extremes detrimental to the women's farming efforts. Drought has become more prevalent in northern Uganda (The World Bank Group, 2016), and the women described how the hardships of drought and dramatic climate variability impeded on their livelihoods. The subtheme *access to and affordability of healthcare* explicated the women's struggles to afford adequate health care, assuming they were able to access it. This subtheme reveals the lack of infrastructure, such as transport and health clinics, and their travails to reach distant facilities. The subtheme *fear of abandonment by the INGO* illuminated the women's worries about their welfare and livelihoods after the program's end. The women spoke appreciatively of its impact and repeatedly expressed their wishes for continued support. These remarks usually followed comments about the program's unknown completion date and the uncertainties they felt. This theme exemplified their reliance on the INGO.

The study's theoretical perspectives were grounded in empowering women to transcend the constraints they face (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The women described that, as a result of participating in the INGO's program, they were *transcending the constraints* of northern Uganda's gender rules (Roberts & Edwards, 2017). Critical theory gave a way to "critique and challenge, to transform, and to analyze" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 59) the gender inequality experienced by the women. In addition, feminist theory recognized the intent of the empowerment program to "correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position" (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 28). The theme *further aspirations for improved quality of life* evokes critical theory in that the women had begun to *envision new possibilities for their lives*. This theme, along with the themes *securing children's future through education* and *ongoing challenges*, also demonstrates critical theory by helping the women to "examine the conditions of their existence" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 29). In accord, the phenomenon's *essence* was distilled: *Women participants of programs fostered by the INGO Field of Hope in Uganda, although feeling empowered based on increased perceptions of self-esteem, gender equity, sense of community, agricultural knowledge, and economic improvement, still faced ongoing challenges and aspired to further improve their livelihoods*.

Evidence exists that empowering women will have a direct and substantial impact on the economies of their nations (USAID, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2013), and empowering them in the agricultural sector could stimulate that aspect of the economy while reducing food insecurity (FAO, 2011; Lecoutere, 2017; O'Sullivan et al., 2014; The World Bank, 2016; USAID, 2015). Although this study did not quantitatively analyze the economic impact of such empowerment, we recommend that be assessed in future inquiries.

Women suffer from lower agricultural productivity than men, sometimes due to fewer inputs but, at times, in spite of such (Ali et al., 2015; O'Sullivan et al., 2014; Quisumbing & Pandolfelli, 2010). Therefore, as global actors work to empower women, it is important to understand if agriculturally focused empowerment programs aid in improving farming productivity and, thereby, reduce food insecurity. Studies of the agricultural capacity developed by such programs should be conducted. Future research should also analyze the likelihood of children's, especially girls', school enrollment increasing and sustaining after their mothers' involvement in an empowerment program. Studies have shown that the likelihood of education improves when a mother's access to funds increases (Ben-Ari, 2014; The ONE Campaign, 2015). More research exploring the views of participants' spouses on gender equality and the empowerment of their wives after involvement with such programs is also warranted. An assessment of their pre- and post-intervention perceptions regarding gender roles and related

issues of equality could be conducted. We also recommend that inquiries examine women's fears of abandonment by development agencies. Rahman (2006) found that many INGOs in Bangladesh had shifted from mobilization of their beneficiaries to "service delivery" (p. 468), which inspired dependence. Studies should be done to determine which INGO-sponsored activities may foment dependency on service provision over inspiring self-empowerment.

We recommend that INGOs and other development actors routinely assess and evaluate their projects to determine what is working and what is not, and adjust as needed. The WEAI (Alkire et al., 2013) may be a helpful tool for Field of Hope (2020a) and other actors to use. Moreover, INGOs should emphasize *participatory approaches* (Zimmerman, 1995) to their development work. By using this approach, INGOs would be better able to amplify the oftentimes *silent voices* of their participants (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010). INGOs working in women's empowerment should also teach business skills and assist beneficiaries in targeting markets to likely increase their incomes. McMullen (2010) described *development entrepreneurship* as a form of social entrepreneurship that works to lift individuals out of poverty through entrepreneurial practices, which translates well to the work of Field of Hope (2020a) and similar INGOs. These actors should also recognize the beneficiaries' fears of abandonment and clearly communicate their schedules for ending projects.

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