

## Empowering Women and Achieving Gender Equality through Capacity Building Programmes: The Role of NGOs

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### Abstract

*To achieve sustainable development goal five (5), which addresses gender equality and women empowerment, several efforts have been initiated by Non-Governmental Organisations and other voluntary bodies. This paper reviews the efforts of the African Aurora Business Network, a local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that operates in Ghana. This review is based on secondary data sources and primary data (in-depth interviews with Project officers and beneficiaries of AABN capacity building programs). It has been concluded that programmes geared towards women's empowerment generate a powerful influence on the norms, values, and finally, the laws that govern these communities. Women can access the resource that enhances their livelihoods and their households.*

*Nevertheless, patriarchal dominance and stigmatisation continued to hinder women who tried to participate in capacity-building programs by NGOs. Some cannot use the skills because the societal norms limit them. It is recommended that non-governmental organisations continue developing women's empowerment as their efforts continue to impact SDG goal 5 positively. However, the interventions and discussion in empowering women's abilities and their resource growth should involve all factions of society, including men, from the onset of project implementation to ensure that the*

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*goals of gender equality, equity, and substantial development around the world are achieved.*

**Keywords:** Gender equality, women empowerment, SDG 5, capacity building programmes, NGOs

## INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment and gender equality continue to gain prominence in the discourse for achieving sustainable development globally. In the past decade, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) sought to achieve this in Goal 3 (Promote gender equality and empower women). However, some researchers like Kabeer (2020) argued that women empowerment and equality concepts could be seen in almost all the MDGs. For example, Kabeer (2019) noted that improving maternal mortality captured a facet of empowering women's health and well-being. The Sustainable Development Goals also cover gender equality and empowerment issues in goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls). Gender equality, according to the United Nations Women Chapter (2022), "implies that the interests, needs, and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men."

For the European Institute for Gender Equality (2020), gender equality means 'equal rights, duties and opportunities of women and men, and girls and boys. Kabeer (2019) also explained women empowerment as granting women and girls the right to openings that were once not reachable. The United Nations Women chapter (2022) posits that developing women's human resources and capabilities is crucial if sustainable and efficient productivity is achieved around the globe. An indication that women empowerment and gender equality issues do not only apply to women alone but rather to every person and should be regarded as a human right and a criterion for nations to achieve the SDGs set. Some studies in India and Bangladesh concluded that a woman's access to employment outside the house upsurges her household bargaining power (Anderson and Eswaran, 2009; Rahman and Rao, 2004).

Nonetheless, Banks and Hulme (2012) have argued that ensuring women's empowerment and their capability development cannot be done by government bodies without help. Thus, the efforts of private entities and voluntary organisations such as Non- Governmental Organizations, etc., are also needed. This paper discusses the roles NGOs are playing in developing capabilities and human resources of women by focusing on African Aurora Business Network (AABN, Ghana) as a case study while paying attention to some challenges they face and the way forward.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Defining Empowerment**

Empowerment refers to offering individuals power in making choices that were once not readily available to them. From the Empowerment approach to the development of women, Mayoyeta (2005) highlighted that it stems from the third world feminist and grassroots organisations. The empowerment approach aims to upsurge the self-reliance of women and encourage change at the policy, legislative, societal, economic, and other levels for their gain. Mayoux (2005) also explained that the main point of reference of the empowerment approach is the “triple roles” of women, and it emphasises women’s access to decision-making. Empowerment is linked to the World Bank’s renewed highlight on economic growth and poverty reduction. Thus, women’s economic empowerment is considered necessary ‘to stimulate shared growth’ (World Bank, 2021). There is a debate in the literature on if empowerment should be seen as a process or outcome (Odera and Mulusa, 2020; Mayoux, 2005). For Rappaport (1987), the term can be measured as both a process and an outcome. On the other hand, Zimmerman (2001) believes that empowerment as a process covers “how people, organisations, and communities become empowered”; while, as an outcome, it looks at the consequences of those processes.

### **Women empowerment**

Women empowerment could enhance women’s capacity to stimulate or make deliberate life choices when that power was formerly non-existent. This could be economic, social, legal, or even political wise. For Dandona (2015), empowerment in women’s development discourse is a means of defining, challenging, and overcoming barriers in her life through which she upsurges her ability to shape her life. The process is expected not to improve their skills and access to productive resources but also to succeed in enhancing quality, dignity, and work in the social status. Anyidoho and Manuh (2010) posited that economic empowerment reduces restrictions on women’s access to resources, training, or employment to increase their incomes and productivity. VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) saw women’s empowerment through the lens of transformation. For them, it comprises a means by which the lives of females are transformed from a situation of limited power to one where their access to power is boosted. VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) noted that women’s empowerment could be in the form of personal, relational, and environment. From a unique aspect, it covers improving self-esteem. On the Relational element of empowerment, VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) explained it to cover empowering women to deal with the power struggle in their immediate networks, such as households and family ties, while the environmental aspect

of empowerment dealt with the broader society in terms of customs and belief systems.

The three aspects of explaining women's empowerment as a concept by (VeneKlasen and Miller, 2002) are similar to Kabeer's three-dimensional model of empowerment. Notably, research and academic review have studied a diversity of very different facets of women's empowerment over the decades. Undeniably, empirical research has dealt with the aspect of women's empowerment, including measures such as the capacity for action, self-determination, self-confidence, agency, autonomy, etc. (Malhotra et al., 2002; Hansen, 201 5). Nevertheless, one can deduce from all definitions that women's empowerment is a multifaceted concept, consisting of different components and accepts that empowerment is a process from being "un-empowered to becoming empowered". Hitherto, it is expected that an individual's diversity of choices is broadened through empowerment, and the power to make decisions is also upgraded.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

In capturing the need for women's empowerment and gender equality into mainstream development policies, some theories have led and contributed to making a difference. In the 1960s, Women and Development (WAD) (modernisation and liberal feminism) upsurged. In contrast, in the 1970's Women in Development (WID) and the recent Gender and Development (GAD), which were movements that reinforced rights and inclusion, also came up (Erwér 2000). Recent attempts in this regard are highlighted in the Sustainable Development Goals and the past Millennium Development Goals. At the same time, the WID approach intended to advocate for increasing the amount of development aid directed toward women but was heavily criticised as it did not tackle the root cause of discrimination and inequalities that affect women (Jabbar and Zaza, 2016).

Similarly, WAD pushed for equitable participation of women in social, economic, legal, and political parts of society and governance. Even so, it was also criticised by most scholars for not engaging in full-scale analysis of relationships that exist in patriarchal societies, oppression, and modes of production. A more comprehensive approach is seen in the GAD approach, where attention is given to gender and tackling socially specified roles and activities that limit women in certain aspects (Kabeer, 2005). Through these approaches, development practitioners are being called upon to pay attention to issues including power, empowerment, and advocacies for triple roles for women (i.e., production, reproduction, and community roles). Other mainstream theories that argue in favour of women empowerment are Sen's **capabilities approach** and Kabeer's (2008) **three-dimensional model**.

**The capabilities approach** was originally developed by Scholar Amartya Sen. With women's capability development and empowerment, Sen (2009) highlighted that it is indispensable that effort toward the capabilities of women not only provide them with the capacity to achieve this competence but also the choice and freedom to do so. Thus, Sen argued that although women are usually seen as 'passive recipients of welfare, agencies and institutions must consider empowering them with training and skills which grant them the ability to gain employment, receive an independent income and contribute to decision-making processes within and outside the family.'

Secondly, similar to Sen's (2009) capability approach, Kabeer's (2008) **three-dimensional model** also points out that three things are crucial to developing the capabilities and empowering women. They are resources, agencies, and achievement. Kabeer (2005) explained that 'resources refer to material, human, and social expectations and allocations; agency covers the ability or sense of power to define one's goals, act upon them, and decide on their strategic life outcomes. The achievements component of the three-dimensional model includes a variety of outcomes ranging from improved well-being to achieving equal representation of women in politics. That is to say, the fundamental assumption is that women's empowerment is the process of having and using resources in an agentic manner to grasp specific achievements (Malhotra et al., 2002; Khan and Khan, 2016). Kabeer urges scholars to pay attention to outcomes from the process of empowerment. Odera and Mulusa (2020) also suggested that agencies pay attention to the resources and outcomes of their effort. This is key in helping vulnerable people and the minority who may perhaps necessitate extra assistance to empower them to maximise their capabilities. Thus, for the Human resources capabilities of women to be improved, so it trickles down to the societies and even organisations, the effort of institutions such as non-governmental organisations may be required.

### **Capacity building programmes and their links to women's empowerment**

To advance women's capabilities and human resources, some charitable groups launched special programmes based on calls from the MGDs & SDGs (Idawati et al, 2016). For example, the MGDs had critical items that required organisations to provide capacity building and training programs to empower women (example: reducing women and girls' responsibility for unpaid care work; securing women's participation, voice, and influence in decision-making; access to decent work on an equal basis; and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights; Millennium Task Force report, 2005). Jabbar and Zaza (2016) reported from their studies that women's empowerment should cover not only focus on equal capabilities (e.g.,

education; health) or equal access to resources and prospects (e.g., employment) but also provide the women with the ability to use those rights, capabilities, resources, and opportunities to make strategic choices and decisions.

Similarly, the SDG's effort toward developing women's capacity through various training and programmes is in line with a laudable effort. For instance, women's capability development stems from the stand-alone goal (SDG 8.5 argues for equal pay for work of equal value; and SDG 6.2 advocates for eliminating gender disparity in education), which is seen as more comprehensive and transformative than that of the MDGs. It is geared toward encouraging agencies (voluntary and non-voluntary) to put measures to help women develop their capabilities to the highest order.

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### **Efforts by Voluntary organisations and their impacts**

As a response to the global call for developing the capabilities of women, several voluntary groups are into developing the capabilities of women all over the world through capacity building and mentoring programmes. Examples include ActionAid, Women's Global Empowerment Fund, Moremi Initiative for Women's Leadership in Africa, Women in Successful Careers, etc. For example, the Women's Global empowerment Fund promotes the underprivileged women in Eastern Africa by helping them access microfinance while providing training on how to grow their businesses. In the same way, Equality Now engages in advocacy geared towards equal

opportunities and respect of rights for women in Kuwait, the United States, etc., by influencing policies such as eliminating sex tourism. All these efforts by these voluntary organisations are aimed toward developing boldness and improving the livelihoods of women and their households.

Odera and Mulusa (2020) argued that most projects implemented by voluntary organisations had a positive impact on the women as individuals, their households and even the wider society. Awuku et al (2020) noted that these impacts include but are not limited to improved income and livelihood of women and their household; growth in their range of choices and creation of space for them to explore; and mindfulness of issues surrounding gender equality. Similar to findings from AABN in Ghana, Jabbar and Zaza (2016) reported that skills training programmes for women refugees at the Zaatari camp in Jordan greatly influenced the women. For instance, it built their entrepreneurship skills, thereby improving their sources of income. During such training, women were also taken through knowledge of their human rights, which helped in their day-to-day interaction with their families and society.

For Johnson and Adams (2004), the projects and efforts of ActionAid and its partners in Uganda help impart confidence to women to venture into leadership roles. It is reported by Johnson and Adams (2004) that five of the women who contested for political office in Uganda won. An indication that the capacity development of women can indeed help in the agenda to achieve gender equity and empower women around the world. In Bangladesh, Nepal and India, ActionAid run projects that provide capacity building and human resource training for small scale enterprises while providing access to microcredit. (Rahman and Rao 2004). These programmes are similar to what AABN offer young women in Ghana. Increased cognisance of issues such as legal ones (e.g., marriage) among participants also increased through human resource development programmes organised by NGOs (Odera and Mulusa, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this section discussed some key concepts and theories that inform women's resource development and capabilities. It was discussed that women's empowerment discourse arose from the early 1950s when approaches and movements such as Women in Development called for systematic efforts to develop and include women in policy dimensions Dworkin et. al. (2016). It has been established those recent SDGs and theories such as Kabeer's three-dimensional models all called for developing the capabilities of women to be able to achieve sustainable development. The case study section will discuss in detail the efforts of the African Aurora Business Network (**AABN**) in Ghana in this regard.

## **RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY**

This section discusses the effort of AABN's (an NGO in Ghana) role in developing the human resource capabilities of women based on a detailed qualitative study methodology. In line with the study's mainly qualitative stance, the researcher used interviews as the primary data collection method with a structured interview guide as a tool. Interviews are essential data collection methods in qualitative research because it supports capturing straight quotations about people's standpoints and experiences. The structured interview guide was relevant in this study. It gives the interviewees the flexibility to express their opinions in-depth (Patton 2002). The intricacy of the empowerment process will be discoursed by comparing the effort of AABN in Ghana with other NGOs while linking it to literature and cases from different geographical settings. The interviews comprise two (2) Project Officers of AABN in Ghana and ten (10) women beneficiaries of the programme in Sekondi Takoradi, Ghana. Additionally, secondary data sources and other scholarly articles were used for a critical review of the findings.

### **AABN's efforts in developing human resource capabilities of women in Ghana**

The African Aurora Business Network (AABN), a local NGO in Ghana, was established in 2004 to provide business coaching and training to small-scale enterprises in Ghana. In 2015, the management and particularly the founder (an advocate for women empowerment), deemed it right to contribute to the MGDs by setting up a department with the sole goal of offering mentoring, entrepreneurship training, and coaching to women in the three metropolises of Ghana. The capacity development and training programs were directed toward helping women set entrepreneurial ventures from the vocational skills they learned. It was also to prepare them in courses such as proposal writing, bookkeeping, etc., to have access to microfinance facilities to support their business ventures. This was done according to the respondent by partnering with other local and international NGOs. They directly sponsored women to acquire vocational and technical skills (e.g., plumbing, interior décor, etc.).

### **Success and challenges**

According to the respondents interviewed, AABN has trained over 100 young women through their business and mentoring programmes across five (5) cities in Ghana. The women have received formal coaching and training on how to write business plans and proposals and how to pitch to investors. The majority of these girls, through the programs, were able to develop boldness and confidence to face obstacles (ridicule) that were thrown at them during technical training.



One of the beneficiaries stated that *“the training program has been eye-opening for me. I only finished Junior high School; hence when the opportunity came for us to apply for grants to set up our businesses after the vocational training, I was sad because I had no idea how to do it. AABN’s coaching and the entrepreneurial programme helped develop my capacity to pitch to investors. Thankfully, I am one of the winners. I will be able to set up the interior décor shop I have always been dreaming of”* ... 23-year-old beneficiary.

For another beneficiary, *“the training has provided me with skills to stand on my own and make key decisions, which I could have only done depending on my finance. I am financially educated now, so I can manage my shop effectively and make profits to support my child”* .....24-year-old beneficiary.

The Project officer interviewed attested that, with the support of international NGOs, ten (10) of these women had successfully won grants (through business proposals submitted after the mentoring training) as of 2018, which will help them set up an enterprise. This has had a significant impact on individuals and households, including improving the income levels and exposing the girls to gender equality knowledge. From the interview with respondents, it can be argued that developing the capacity of women and increasing their chances for employment goes a long way to strengthening them in society and widening their options concerning authority and power. These findings confirm the conclusions made by Mason et al. (2002) studies.

The key challenge the respondent pointed out was the present social norms that continue to limit other girls interested in enrolling and making a difference. Thus, the patriarchal system gives power to fathers, boyfriends, or husbands who were able to stop the women from going further. The officer interviewed highlighted that *“when the team visit some communities, some factions of the family especially male figures, see the programmes as breeding for misunderstanding in their homes. This is because they believe providing the women with such knowledge and capacity building programmes will make the girls rebellious and less submissive”*. This confirms findings from studies done by Hofstede (2001), where it was argued that when the power gap in the family is hefty, women and children are taught to submit rather than to be independent. Over time, women in these types of societies learn to accept the unequal division of power (Hofstede, 2001, Ch. 2). The findings suggest that some cultures still see that developing women's capabilities to be financially dependent will not help the household management.

The programmes, according to respondents, also helped prepare the skill set of some of the women to join the corporate environment and perform very well. The interviewee noted that *“women who took part in the mentoring training contribute massively to the achieving the goals of the organisation*

*they are currently working in, which gives us great joy and accomplishment.* An indication that developing human resources helps in gender diversity and equal representation of women in all sectors, especially in male-dominated areas.

In conclusion, I am arguing that AABN's effort to empower women through capacity training, mentoring and coaching support yields positive outcomes. Young women find financial freedom and maximise their potential in entrepreneurship through this capacity development programme. However, partnering with grassroots stakeholders in explaining the essence of empowering women and enlarging the pool of choices that shape their lives should be paramount in addressing challenges.

## **CRITICAL REVIEW**

A critical assessment of the literature and findings from the case study with the view of the authors on the concepts and theories will be discussed in this section.

On the concept of empowerment, it can be concluded from the reviewed literature that people in vulnerable positions have some form of empowerment to overcome their challenges. Therefore, we will describe empowerment as the process through which persons with fewer opportunities or capabilities concerning a resource or choice are given a chance to have access to it through innovative programs or sustainable project implementation. The authors of this article support intellectual such as Zimmerman (2001), who argued and described empowerment from the point of view of it being a process. On women empowerment, all theories and approaches reviewed made a clear call for help from institutions and voluntary organisations to help assist. This was because extra assistance was needed worldwide if the status quo or norms that limit the prospects for women were to be challenged and if any success was to be achieved in gender equality and equity. From this angle, Jabbar and Zaza (2016), and Huis et al. (2019) all argued that women's empowerment should be considered a process because organisations will have to do more to make their empowerment and capacity building programmes effective. The three-dimensional model by Kabeer could be used to support findings from the case studies. In comparing the findings to Kabeer's model, it could be argued that NGOs (like AABN) represent agencies and bring in resources to help empower women. At the same time, the outcome of the process is seen or measured in the improvement in the livelihood of the beneficiaries as they put the acquired skills into use.

While implementing programmes to empower women, dynamics in challenges could differ from one geographical location. A peculiar challenge

identified by Jabbar and Zaza (2016) was the patriarchal effect that deters women from participating and using the skills they acquire. ActionAid International report in 2018 also stated that such challenges were also experienced by their local partners who engaged in programmes to support women in Brazil and Uganda. The stigmatisation that women face is a challenge that limits the extent to which they participate in such projects; however, the sternness was quite diverse in each geographical or cultural setting. This is because some societies are more advanced and have put in place policies and advocacies geared toward improving these issues on gender and women's development.

In developing women's human resources and capabilities, the authors argues that challenges like families not supporting their relatives from participating could be solved if NGOs engage stakeholders, especially the fathers and husbands of these women, from the onset of project implementation once families understand how important it is for their daughters or mothers to be empowered. The benefit that will drain them will go a long way to improve the response rate and afford females the peace to participate and benefit from capacity development programmes. For Huis et al (2019) and Khan and Khan (2016), initial engagement of, for instance, immediate families could help bring on board all and sundry into the gender empowerment discourse and ensure the efficiency and sustainability of these projects while achieving success in women's development.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This paper discussed voluntary organisations' efforts in developing capabilities and human resources of women with AABN in Ghana as the case study. The study's theoretical background was discussed from the Sen's Capability approach and Kabeer's three-dimensional model of women empowerment. It has been argued that the empowerment process and impacts can be assessed by looking at the individual, households or the society where the individual is found. It has been established from scholarly articles and research that NGOs are putting in measures to empower women through carefully selected programmes in capacity and human resource development.

A practical perspective to this discourse was done from the effort being made by AABN Ghana (a local NGO) that provides mentoring and coaching workshops and training for women. The females feel the impact of their programmes, while an improvement in the income and financial skill set impacts their household and society. It was also discussed that through these capacity-building programmes, the awareness level of the women on issues like gender equality and human rights had also improved. Finally, the

programme created a platform for enhancing the range of choices and self-esteem of women who had participated or benefitted from it. It has also been concluded from the practical perspective and findings from efforts by AABN that offering financial freedom for women through skills training and capacity building essentially helps in achieving SDG 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls). Apart from the achievement of AABN's effort in ensuring that the beneficiaries set up their entrepreneurial ventures, it was also confirmed that those who had joined the corporate environment benefitted from improved self-confidence, which they used to help achieve the organisation's goals. Nevertheless, findings from the practical perspective and reviewed literature showed that patriarchal dominance and stigmatisation continued to hinder women who tried to participate in capacity-building programs by NGOs. Some cannot use the skills because the societal norms set boundaries emerging from gender roles that do not promote women's financial independence.

### **Recommendation**

From the findings of the practical perspective and literature reviewed. We recommend that NGOs continue their effort to develop the human resource of women around the globe. Their efforts have yielded a positive influence in achieving SDG goal 5. Yet, it is proposed that each intervention should involve all household actors, especially the male counterpart, from the onset. To achieve gender equality and empowerment, programmes and issues on women should not be a discussion that involves only them alone but everyone if any quality and significant development around the world is to be achieved. Furthermore, extra efforts should by states institution are essential in educating the general on how indispensable it is for women to be empowered. Such public education could try to debunk some myths surrounding the activities of voluntary organisations and the independence of women. A broader longitudinal study could be conducted to make more comprehensive overviews for further studies.

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