

Listen to the Voices of Maasai Women in Kenya: Ensuring the Well-Being of their Families through Collective Actions

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Abstract

This is an ethnographic study that provides insight into grassroots activities managed by Maasai women leaders in the Narok area of Kenya. Four women's narratives were used as a basis of analysis to demonstrate their roles in facilitating grassroots activities to improve village women's well-being despite gender discrimination and multidimensional constraints. The women's group leaders commented that low literacy had a negative influence on Maasai women's development; however, the issue of illiteracy could be overcome through cooperative learning during women group activities in their village. The results showed that the women's group leaders played a facilitative role in improving women's situations and everyday lives through knowledge sharing and collective social actions. An analysis of the narratives of four women demonstrated that: each woman has a unique experience of grassroots development activities that should be valued; and village women promote women's empowerment and develop forms of resistance to gender inequality by accommodating men's self-pride and different gender roles to ensure a harmonious society.

Introduction

While a scholarship concerning women's roles in community development in Africa increases, a recent study highlights that there is capacity within a small community for some women to challenge their lack of participation in decision-making in a village community by developing their own sense of agency and contributing to development from within (Fraser, 2009; Hodgson, 2011; Trutko, O'Brien, & Wandner, 2014). Women can fully participate in small development programs. It is also argued in this article that sustainable development needs to be owned and controlled by local people based on their internal values.

However, not so much is known about Maasai women's grassroots participation in community development from the women's perspectives in Kenya. Little is clear about Maasai women leaders who actively organize a grassroots women's group to build fellow women's capacity to improve the well-being of their families and take initiatives in fighting against gender inequality which promotes the sustainable development of Kenya. Grassroots women's groups are locally based and in most cases, women-led organizations that aim at empowering women and advancing women's rights related to multiple forms of discrimination (Hodgson, 2011; UN, 2015).

Women's issues are multi-dimensional and interlinked, including socio-cultural, traditional, and economic factors that affect women's status. This is especially the case in the Narok County in the Rift Valley Province of Kenya, where Maasai traditions and cultural practices are well preserved and practised. Due to the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriages in the community, girls' participation in education is affected and restricted (Chege &

Sifina, 2006; Takayanagi, 2014). Moreover, many girls are brought up to be subservient to men and are regarded as a gift from a father to a future husband (Chege & Sifina, 2006). Most women are expected to depend first on their parents, then on their husbands, and ultimately, on their sons. Because of this obvious gender inequality, women's access to resources as well as even basic education is limited. Furthermore, while men act as bread-winners, herding cattle and protecting their households, women often carry out all household tasks (Saitoti & Bechwith, 1988). Therefore, these women are invited to explain their grassroots activities to make a positive social change in the male-dominant community.

This study examines how women group leaders facilitate grassroots activities with fellow women and how village women construct experiences, and utilize the skills gained and knowledge produced in relation to resisting traditional patriarchy to improve the well-being of their families. The interviewed women's voices reveal some strategies and forms of resistance that have emerged from women group activities.

First women's development in Africa is reviewed from a perspective of women. Then the research method is described and present four women leaders' experiences of community development activities through grassroots women's groups in Narok County, Kenya. Narrative analysis is used to value these interviewed women's life experiences and examine how women leaders facilitate the activities with fellow women to overcome traditional patriarchy in Naork, Kenya. The article also attempts to analyze whether the development of women's empowerment was promoted through collective action in their village.

Women and Development in Africa

As the focus of this study is village women's activities that enhance their community's development, this section presents a review of women development in Africa.

The policy direction to include women in development came from the first international conference organized by the commission on the status of women that the United Nations held in Mexico City in 1975. Through the establishment of the Women in Development (WID) approach, women's issues were conceptualized in the development context. WID aimed to promote women's economic development, and emphasized women's productive roles.

WID seemed to be just another attempt to integrate women into male-dominated development programs, hence women were seen as a separate group to policy makers and development interventionists (Moser, 1993). Given that women are usually responsible for food production, nutrition and the family's general welfare, it has been argued that women need better education and better technology for their household activities and better access to resources (Stamp, 1989).

For many feminists the WID approach was seen as a failure as it did not seek gender equality (Moser, 1993). The WID approach was observed to evaluate development by the adoption of Western technologies, institutions and values (Vavrus, 2007). The WID approach was criticized for being universalizing a "particular white Western middle class vision" (Jackson & Pearson 1998, p. 6).

Given the flows in WID, feminists in particular called for a new approach. This evolved as Gender and Development (GAD). The decade of the 1980's saw a rapid growth in Gender and Development Policy (Ostergaad, 1992). GAD was conceived with a further advancement in the Women in Development approach that had failed to address women's subordination. Ostergaad clearly distinguished between WID and GAD:

The concept of Women in Development is concrete and may lead to marginalizing women as a particular species with inherited handicaps. The concept of Gender in Development is abstract and opens up for the realization of women's productivity in development" (Ostergaad, 1992, p.7).

As gender refers "to the qualitative and interdependent character of women's and men's positions in society," the term gender relations means social division of labor between men and women (Ostergaad, 1992, p.7). Empowerment and participation have become crucial elements in the gender and development approach. While in the WID approach, women participation was addressed in development work, GAD concentrated more on decision-making processes in development programs. It was seen that women should gain power through gender-aware training to negotiate with men in the decision-making process in order to build an equitable society (Williams, Seed, & Mwau, 1994).

The GAD-related gender projects aimed to identify and challenge institutionalized patriarchy and gender relations in the domestic context that oppressed women (Moser, 1993). However, Fraser (2009) from a critical perspective argues that policy decisions supporting gender equality tend to be made by governments and international organizations without the consultation of girls, boys, women and men in local communities where the policies are implemented. Hence, the boundaries for participation in the decision-making process should be challenged as women could not participate but were those targeted by development programs. Fraser (2009) further suggests that the NGOs can play a role as a facilitator to translate the needs and thoughts of local communities to governments and donor agencies.

Monkman, Miles, & Easton (2008) suggest that the link between economic and political empowerment is difficult as financial resources are needed to enact other political and social transformations. This means that even if women in the African context could initiate their own economic independence, they would find it difficult to bring about other reforms towards gender equality. The everyday life of women is negotiated in the convergence of different cultural influences and constrained by different power structures (Monkman et al., 2008). In addition, the complex positionality faced by women in the intersection of multiple identity locations should be understood as "a social process related to practices where positionality is the space at the intersection of structure (social position/social effects) and agency (social positioning/meaning and practice)" (Anthias, 2001, p. 635). Women's subordinated situations are subjected to a range of class, age, race and gender, hence each individual woman has a different life experience and different social issues to overcome (Voola, 2014).

Both the WID and GAD approaches have managed to integrate gender issues into mainstream discourse and practice in the field of international development as evidenced by the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in China in 1995. In a post-2015 agenda,

comprising 17 goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were set and agreed to by governments, international donor agencies and NGOs. One of the goals directly concerned gender: Goal 5 - “achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls” (UN, 2015). However, feminist critics of the development policy and practice warn against the loss of critical reflection surrounding gender. For instance, Mohanty (1984) suggests that the incorporation of woman as a group based on biological universals, rather than social and cultural characteristics, has led to restrictive agendas for reform. Therefore, women’s interests have become a descriptor rather than a tool of analysis. Mohanty concludes that women are put into homogeneous groups such that “sexual difference becomes coterminous with female subordination, and power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (it means men), and people who do not (it means women)” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 344).

Several studies conducted in Africa provide empirical data for consideration. In Africa, in spite of active participation in the agricultural area, women are restricted from property ownership, land tenure systems, and access to finance, education and social welfare services due to socio-cultural factors (Hodgson, 2011; Kiptot & Franzel, 2011; Oduro, Baah-Boateng, & Boakye-Yiadom, 2011). Inequalities between men and women regarding assets, wages, education and employment still exist in Kenya (Chiuri, 1996). The assets or resources can be the means of production such as land and labor or capital/finances in the form of cash and/or credit. Some claimed that the traditional patriarchal systems in Africa were reconstructed under colonialism (1895–1963) in ways that benefited men, disadvantaged women, and strengthened male control over female labor and productivity (Chiuri, 1996; Hodgson, 2011; Kiptot & Franzel, 2011; Oduro et al., 2011). In addition, local chiefs became colonial functionaries who regained the power to allocate land (Chiuri, 1996; Kimani & Kombo, 2010).

Despite the hardships most women in Africa face, there have been a number of autonomous grassroots groups established by women that are committed to mobilizing resources to sustain women’s groups and activism. Local community and faith-based organizations provide opportunities for informal learning (Trutko et al., 2014). Such organizations also provide an opportunity for the organization’s participants to engage in informal network building. This has been true for some churches and grassroots women’s groups in Narok, as described by the women’s voices in this study. After becoming empowered through informal learning, women have excised their agency in response to oppressive daily situations (Papen, 2012). For instance, Adenugba and Adedoyin (2014) in Nigeria emphasized that if local, small-scale business women have access to networks and associations providing informal capacity development opportunities, their small businesses would improve. Hence, outside agencies need to support the learning needs of local women entrepreneurs (Davis, 2012).

This is also demonstrated well from the village women’s voices in this study. The local women brought a value to the field of women’s entrepreneurship, which promotes social justice, accountability, creating opportunities, providing access to local resources, and building the management capacities of women. Women’s rights, empowerment, health and reproductive rights,

water, education, and agriculture have been prioritized by many women groups in the research site of Kenya, which is described in women's voices.

Given that this study is focused primarily on how women's capacity can foster community development in Kenya, women empowerment is valued as a capacity that enables social change and women's level of agency within communities. Women's social networks and their roles as the managers of social relations put them in a central position within their communities to act as agents of change and community development (Carmen, 1996). Further, it is observed that women groups are effective in building individual confidence and empowerment while leading solidarity among women in development programs (Jackson, 2011).

Methodology

This study used an ethnographic study design with semi-structured interviews and observation. Narok North District of the Rift Valley Province in Kenya where the Maasai is dominant was selected as I had already established a rapport with local people during a previous research project conducted by a Japanese university between 2007 and 2009, and I was able to undertake ethnographic research in the community. The Maasai are semi-nomadic people and the centrality of cattle in Maasai life is highlighted by the women in the research site (Saitoti & Bechwith, 1988). As the primary goal of ethnography is to comprehend the socio-cultural contexts of a particular society (Atkinson, Delamont, Lofland J., Coffey, & Lofland L., 2001), ethnography was appropriate for my study. By participating in the grassroots women groups and literacy centre, observing and interviewing local people, I tried to understand the real life situations of local people in Kenya.

Data collection was conducted in Kenya during one six-month trip between April and September 2011. While twelve women's leaders were interviewed, four women's stories will be introduced in order to allow research participants to be heard and to demonstrate the value of women's voices in particular. Ethics approval was obtained and procedures were followed in accordance with the standards of the University of Sydney's Ethics Committee (number 02-2011/13592). A written informed consent was obtained from all participations.

Results and Discussion

This section provides the space to listen to the voices of the women group leaders' experiences in women group activities and to hear of the roles they play in their groups.

There is an introduction to each research participant, highlighting her background and the activities she conducts in a women's group. The first questions put to the participants were: How long have you been participating in a women's group? What activities are conducted in your women's group? What is your role in a women's group? Questions were aimed at understanding the roles the women played in improving the well-being of their community. Lastly, women's views on the future of Narok North District were also voiced in each narrative.

Each narrative was drawn from field notes and came via a local interpreter who spoke English, Swahili and Maa. Each woman was free to speak in a language they were comfortable

with in order to express their opinions to the researcher. While school teachers spoke to the researcher in English, other women spoke to the researcher in Swahili and/or Maa. All these names are pseudonyms.

Narrative 1: Joan's Story

I am 48 years old and am a school teacher. All of my four children are educated. I participate in four women's groups. One of the groups is about TBA (Traditional Birth Attendance). I am a secretary and have been in the group for five years. Most members are illiterate. The group members were invited for a seminar by a local NGO at school and were trained for a week as TBA, assisting mothers' delivery. Some women in the villages are hesitant to go to the hospital, or some of their houses are very far from the hospital. Each member of the women's group is given a bottle of zinc, soap, threads, a cutting object, gloves, and table size sheets during the seminar. I once attended a child-birth on a public bus. The group members made some red ribbons to raise awareness on HIV-AIDS and sent them to people in the U.S.A. We were told to wait for the payment of the ribbons, but we have never received any payment. In another initiative, the group members were provided with sunflower seeds and beans to plant and harvest. For instance, with a 2 kg packet of beans, each member had a harvest of 4-6 kg of beans and returned the original beans of 2 kg to the organization. However, I did not harvest any crops in 2011 due to a severe drought. The NGO also regularly organized seminars on cleanliness or health issues. There are 18 female members in the group. Members hold irregular meetings. I did not attend meetings for a while, yet I received updates of meetings from other members.

I also joined another group for the promotion of girls' education and the eradication of female genital mutilation (FGM). I have been a member of the group for 7 years and am a treasurer of the group. There are four male and 18 female members in the group. The group members visit schools to empower girls. We teach both boys and girls about harmful cultural practices such as FGM, early sexual activities, early pregnancy, and early marriages. The group also aims to create awareness of the effects of HIV-AIDS. The members also visit churches. I ask male members to discuss issues of girls' education and FGM with men in the community. The negative aspects of FGM and early marriages are explained to women to promote girls' education. When the group received funding from the National AIDS Council, we travelled to the interior region to talk about HIV-AIDS. The group described the benefits of empowering women at churches and schools, and showed female members as role models who impact girls' education. The group has worked closely with an international NGO, World Vision, previously, but the NGO has disappeared from the region. I am well known in the community for rescuing girls who have had decided to run away from FGM. When a girl escapes from her own house to my place, I coordinate with other members to transfer the girl to the District Education Office or Children's Office for the Girl's Safety. I would dress the girl in boy's clothes and travel with her to the district offices by bus in the very early morning so that no-one in the community would see them. I hope to develop a grant proposal to establish a post-secondary education program for young people in the future. I expect that fellow women in the community, especially those who are not educated,

will change their attitudes and be self-reliant. I also hope that mothers can negotiate educational opportunities and early marriages with fathers on behalf of their daughters. Moreover, I hope that fathers retain their daughters in school, and men do not marry off their daughters. I also hope that girls will be empowered to be able to say no to FGM, early sex and marriages. Girls can stand firm and run away to a teacher, a rescue centre, or the District Children's Office. I also expect that people become united and work together for a better future, and I also note an improvement in women's empowerment and girls' education.

Narrative 2: Rose's Story

I am 56 years old and a mother of six children. I am a school teacher. All of my children are educated. I participate in three women's groups and am a chairperson of one of the groups, which promotes girls' education. The group has been in existence since 2001 and registered with the Division of Social Services at the local district office. With members, I have organized seminars at schools and churches to raise awareness of the issues of FGM and HIV-AIDS. Collaborating closely with Joan, I have also supported girls to escape from forced FGM practices that have resulted in them dropping out of school. By discussing and coordinating with the district offices, I assist Joan in moving rescued girls to the district office safely. I focus on psychosocial support and empowerment of girls and women.

The second group is a women's self-help group aimed at improving the standard of living for women. I am the secretary of the group. The group has been in existence since 2009 and registered with the Division of Social Services at the local district office. There are 33 women in the group. The group's major activities are to plant trees in order to improve the environment and also improve members' livelihood, and provide households with a system for storage of rain water. The members plant 50,000 seeds in the forest to provide a nursery/young forest for local schools. Female members make bead ornaments and sell them in the market for income generation. I advise members to plant 25 fruit trees and another 25 ordinary trees at home. The fruit trees are essential to improve the nutrition of families. People know the needs in their community best, hence, they can work together to improve education, the economy and their livelihoods. Regarding colonization, village people have a distinct culture and dignity, but are colonized because they are illiterate. Outsiders came and the village people saw the outsiders as good, so they adopted everything from the outsiders. The outsiders left and village people lost their culture as a consequence. I hope and think economic empowerment is the only way for a woman to raise her status. As with this, a woman begins to have a say. A woman sells vegetables at the market and buys food for her family, and her husband notices that his wife contributes something for the home.

Narrative 3: Ruth's Story

I am 47 years old and am a primary school teacher. I have a small grocery shop in the local market, and have hired a young man to assist me. I have been in a women's group for five years, and I am the secretary of the group. The group aims at improving women's daily needs and economic situation. Women are updated with new information or technology constantly through

the meetings. The group conducts a 'merry-go-around' micro-finance activity, i.e. each member contributes a certain amount of money to be given to a member as members draw lots to decide the order of the receiving the merry-go-round money each time. Meeting twice a month, each member contributes a sum of 500 shillings for the merry-go-around activity. On top of this money, each woman contributes 50 shillings for buying utensils for a member's house. One of the members in turn receives this money to purchase utensils for her house. In addition, 50 shillings is also collected from each member to save in case of an emergency experienced by a group member. When there is a death in a member's family, everyone contributes 200 shillings to organize a funeral. I expect that the women will become independent and learn not to depend on their husbands or to beg from other people.

Narrative 4: Sara's Story

I am around 55 years old. I have not gone to school. However, I have attended an adult literacy class for a few months. (At the time of the interview, Sara was engaged in building a new Maasai house for her family, whilst still carrying out all the household tasks.) I also look after the domestic animals. I make traditional Maasai ornaments to sell in the village. As some women do not know how to produce ornaments, they contract me to make special ornaments and accessories, especially for weddings.

I have been the chairperson of a local church committee for 10 years. I organized a water project with a local NGO. The church women's group collected 2000 shillings from each woman for the project, and the NGO contributed some funds to the project. A water tank was distributed to every family in the church to harvest rain water. When one of the female church members has a problem, or a woman gives birth, fellow women from the group fetch water and firewood for the woman. Fellow women purchase new clothes and utensils for new-born babies. Women of the church also contribute some money and milk for the mother. After worship services, women remain to discuss issues at church. Women actively participate in church activities. I actively encourage village women to attend church. There are two types of meetings at church that I organize: (1) meetings of senior women to act as role models for young women by teaching them about social rules; (2) meetings of young women to encourage them to love their husband and children, and to be hard working. People do not abuse other people, and they become good people after attending church activities. I hope to have a peaceful community where all children are taken to school.

Discussions of the Women Group Leaders' Narratives

This section focuses on the findings and discussion of what women group leaders have experienced when implementing activities in an informal group. Their narratives highlight that gender is a factor that has affected them in many ways and that collective action against gender inequality and poverty alleviation is essential. It also is apparent that the interviewed women respect differences within their group (Crenshaw, 1989).

Women's Grassroots Activities, Development and Empowerment

Joan, Rose, and Ruth obtained higher education (teacher training college). Sara did not receive 'formal education', but had an experience in attending an adult literacy class for a few months. Joan, Rose and Ruth each had a formal job as a school teacher. Sara was a farmer and also had a small business selling Maasai traditional ornaments. It can be said that the beadwork aimed to help the grassroots women generate income by selling it in the market or village. These women view their families as the ones who most ensure maintenance of hegemonic womanhood for the Maasai and as the space where tradition and cultural rituals are taught and enforced.

Three out of the four women reported that they participated in one group. Joan, however, participated in three women's groups, and Rose was affiliated with three different women's groups. While three women did not mention their groups' formal registration, Rose stated that two of her three women's groups were registered with the division of social services of the local district office. The size of membership ranged from 18 to 33 members. The groups were comprised of women and men. They scheduled and conducted their own meetings. The activities of the groups led by these women reflect an adherence to colonial legacies of education, but also a process of decolonization and emancipation of women and girls. The processes that can be seen as decolonization and emancipation include micro-financing and protection of young girls from the traditional FGM.

The interviewed women often mentioned their distinct methods of micro-finance activities such as the merry-go-round, and public health related activities including action related to TBA, HIV-AIDS, FGM and actions towards ensuring access to clean drinking water. While Joan mentioned TBA as the group's activity, other women described tree planting, small businesses, water supply and micro-financing as the purpose of the group activity.

First, Joan and Rose described their involvement in the promotion of girls' education through a women's group in which they coordinate and collaborative in rescuing village girls who were to be married off or were to be forced to undergo the FGM practice. With Joan and Rose's high level of motivation for the promotion of girls' education and women's empowerment, Joan and Rose had also been involved in outside school activities.

In Joan's second group for promoting girls' education and the abolishment of FGM, the group partnered with another NGO to facilitate more effective programs. As funded FGM programs by the outside NGO, World Vision, in Narok were withdrawn from the region, NGOs of developed countries tried to control their economic resources without proper consultation with grass-roots groups (Hulme & Edwards, 1997). Having a connection with government officers, Rose was an effective resource person who could convey women's needs to national development strategies (Mohanty, 2003).

Health and women's issues have been the major concern for the women's groups, since in their male-dominant society, the men have made decisions on the practice of FGM and arrangements for a marriage. Mothers accessing public health information and understanding health guidelines have an effect on children's health (Nutbeam, 2000). Nutbeam (2000) suggested that community based health education is crucial for village people to overcome structural barriers

to health. Carmen (1996) also noted that for a project to be effective, it had to be owned and controlled by group members. In this case, the members took control of the direction of their projects. Joan had opened a space for girls to raise their voices via the group and within the activities produced by the group (Spivak, 1985). Joan was aware of the local communication mechanisms and hindrances imported by the local patriarchal system. Hence, she asked her male peers to discuss harmful cultural practices with fathers and senior male leaders. She attempted to work harmoniously with all the members of the community (Tamale, 2006). Based on the context and who she was speaking with, she applied different communication channels. Applying different communication channels, Joan was able to convey her message to her community members.

Second, being a secretary of the TBA group, Joan had established the sense of togetherness within the group (Mohanty, 2003). Joan also recognized the importance of cooperation and solidarity, and had formed an effective communication mechanism that was constantly updated with the outcomes of group meetings. Joan reported that her illiterate colleagues were comfortable in discussing and exchanging ideas with her. This implied that a space for women to express themselves had been created in the group, a place from which to speak and be heard. As highlighted by Batliwala (2002), grassroots groups often feel that they are dominated and used by counterparts of developed countries. The story of Joan's group activity making red ribbons for American citizens illustrates Batliwala's point. Living in the postcolonial country of Kenya, it seems that women group members did not examine the red ribbon project organized by American people critically which resulted in a failure of the project. This also highlights the power imbalance between the local women's group and the external group in America.

Third, Rose led two other women's groups aimed at improving socio-cultural opportunities through micro-finance and environmental programs. Rose exercised her capacity of human agency, which, as noted by Alsop, Bertelsen, & Holland (2006), one manages a development program based on creative knowledge. In doing this, Rose analyzed issues from both inside and outside community perspectives. Rose promoted the idea that income-generating activities would develop women's capacity of self-reliance.

Rose also understood and identified the fundamental factors of poverty and lack of the power of women in the community. Rose recognized the value of low cost technologies with which village women could manage small-scale businesses with locally available resources such as beadwork (Akube, 2000; Schumacher, 1974). Rose was also aware of the significance of cooperation and solidarity that groups created for local women (Mohanty, 2003; Oyewumi, 2001). By learning and working together, women could conduct a sustainable development program. Moreover, Rose acknowledged that local women could take the initiative to manage community development programs based on their needs, rather than being imposed upon by outsider interventions. As Allen (2008) suggests, a collective empowerment approach to running programs had been adopted in the village context.

Furthermore, similar to Joan, Rose had effectively opened a space for village women to speak out about their views on community issues. Rose's activity demonstrated how a space can be opened up in order for subaltern women to be heard (Spivak, 1985). By learning and working

together in a group, the women had developed confidence to manage income-generating activities. This was one of the aspects of adult learning highlighted by Knowles (1973) and Freire (1976), where adults can learn based on their needs and develop self-empowerment in seeking solutions. While Rose acknowledges the positive side of the Maasai culture regarding communalism and mutual cooperation, Rose was concerned about the negative influence of colonization on the Maasai culture.

Fourth, in the case of Ruth, through the village women's method of micro-finance, the group had developed a high level of mutual trust to run a continuous micro-finance activity. Ruth also explained how the merry-go-round activity was managed. As the women of Ruth's group spent the merry-go-round money on utensils, this indicates that women are managers of their house and spend money on their families instead of their personal interest. Ruth encouraged fellow women to be independent through the micro-finance activity, and women identified the most urgent needs to spend money on (World Bank, 2003). This small grassroots micro-credit activity was managed and controlled by the local women and was observed as effective and emancipating. The small micro-credit program empowered women to work collaboratively (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Phillips, 2015). In this instance, micro-finance literacy had been acquired through informal learning. Orality was the dominant mode of exchange for new information and knowledge in the group (Knowles, 1973). By meeting regularly, these women could discuss issues and gain access to new information. Women had their own space in the women group meetings to find solutions to overcome problems based on their needs. Initiatives to improve the well-being of their families had been taken by the women. Women utilized local resources and knowledge to organize their activities, so they did not have to rely on outside funding. The group produced a method of saving money for emergency cases, and it became meaningful for them (Goetz & Gupta, 1996). As Ruth highlighted, self-reliance among village women had been cultivated through cooperation and solidarity, which was in keeping her collective empowerment approach (Allen, 2008; Maathai, 2008) for prevention of poverty (Carmen, 1996; Huiskamp & Hartman-Mahmud, 2007).

Fifth, Sara was well aware of the severe impact of droughts on village people, and exercised her capacity to manage the water tank project in cooperation with a local NGO. This counters the view that illiterate people have very little capacity to organize and manage development projects, and negotiate outside expert assistance to implement projects. In Sara's case, the project was organized by her and her colleagues. Carmen (1996) and Pradervand (1989) strongly highlight the point that village people are critical players in evaluating urgent needs and have a capacity to implement development projects by themselves. Sara's water tank project in collaboration with an NGO highlights an effective and cooperative partnership. Both the NGO and the church-based group contributed to distributing a water tank to each member of the church. This partnership between a local women's group and an NGO was more effective than the partnership introduced by Joan's narrative because, perhaps, it was to self-define the nature of the project.

Sara facilitated collaborative, informal learning among women to produce ideas to solve issues (Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Rogers, 2004). This implied that Sara recognized the importance of

solidarity and togetherness among people. She placed importance on senior women's life experiences, which reinforced Knowles' (1973) views on processes of adult learning. In addition, Sara emphasised the perseverance of tradition and values to pass down to future generations (Omolewa, 2007). Literacy that supports preservation of culture was discussed and promoted at the women's meetings. Sara recognized the importance of learning from experiences and actively supported the building of spaces for women to exchange their opinions and ideas (Spivak, 1985).

On a separate occasion, grassroots women's groups led by Joan, Rose and Sara collaborated with local NGOs or district offices to advocate for FGM abolishment, girls' education and water resource issues. External organizations played a vital role as a facilitator (Fraser, 2009). In each situation, the collaboration supported members' views and respected their gender and social status within society, while it strengthened their networking and collective action.

The activities of women's groups are directly structured by their immediate needs. Gender not only was manifested as some part of women's groups agendas, but also arose as a social issue to tackle. This represents an effective example promoted by the GAS approach, in which the involvement of women in the decision making process is stressed. This was particularly clear when the women discussed their traditional practice of FGM, girls' education and the heavy household tasks during and after pregnancy. Aspects of the Maasai culture and patriarchy were visible in their narratives as they told stories of their group activities.

The leaders, especially Joan and Rose, observed patriarchy and cultural stereotypes as negative factors, and Rose and Ruth agreed with the women that a lack of financial resources would disempower women. The leaders criticized the harmful practice of FGM, early marriages and the low level of literacy. They argued that some elements of the Maasai tradition forced the women to remain under patriarchal domination. However, the information that the women acquired from the activities taught them to reduce or completely eliminate some of these hardships. Hence, these women's group leaders emphasized skills and knowledge that allowed the women to participate in decision making processes (Trutko et al., 2014).

Collective social actions hold promise for real social transformation within Narok in Kenya. From a perspective of the women's leaders, they had power through collective social actions, spoke their opinion in public, and acted as women leaders in their community. Because of the women leaders' support and collaborative informal learning, other group members could view the community and themselves in it differently. Group members seemed to understand that they were strong in their collective voices working towards change. The women taught and learned from each other.

Conclusion

This article has addressed the key research questions in this study through the opinions of women group leaders of women's grassroots activities impacting the improvement of the status of women in Narok, Kenya, and women's collective action in the village as effective in ensuring the well-being of their families.

Overall, the interviewed women group leaders expressed the view that the low literacy levels hinder women's development. Women group leaders also commented that gender inequality is apparent in the decision-making process in various situations. However, they are also aware of the power and knowledge that village women have to improve the well-being of their community. In addition, they also confirmed that the issue of illiteracy could be overcome by cooperative learning being applied to generate necessary skills. The data illustrated that the women group leaders play a facilitative role in inducing informal learning, and they also attempt to improve women's low status in the community by providing knowledge and raising women's economic activities.

In regard to the negative cultural practices of early marriages and FGM, women group leaders are keen on eliminating these practices and promoting education for girls. All of these activities have been conducted under the method of adult learning (Knowles, 1973) in which adults learn based on their needs and experiences. The comments of the women group leaders also confirmed that orality is a dominant form of passing on information among village women. Overall, village-based women's groups take initiatives and manage projects within their capacity and resources. This is the essential aspect of continued sustainable development.

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