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Assessing the impact of gender roles on access to economic opportunities and decision-making power among rural women

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Abstract

Gender roles significantly shape the social and economic landscapes of rural communities, often influencing women's access to economic opportunities and decision-making power. This study investigates the relationship between traditional gender roles and rural women's economic and decision-making capacity. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research collected quantitative and qualitative data from 382 rural women across three villages. Results highlight substantial disparities in access to resources, participation in economic activities, and household decision-making power, emphasizing the urgent need for gender-sensitive policies to bridge these gaps.

Keywords: Access to resources; Cultural norms; Economic participation; Gender-based disparities; Gendered power dynamics; Rural development; Socio-economic development; Social inclusion; Women's empowerment

1. Introduction

Gender equality is one of the major issues in the study site. Gender inequality remains a pervasive issue in many parts of the world, including the Philippines (World Bank, 2020). Despite progress in promoting gender equality, women continue to face significant barriers to economic empowerment, decision-making power, and social mobility (United Nations, 2020). In rural areas, where poverty and lack of access to resources and services are more pronounced, women's empowerment is even more critical to achieving sustainable development and poverty reduction (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2019).

The Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment (JP RWEE) is a global initiative with an overarching goal to secure rural women's livelihoods, rights and resilience in the context of sustainable development, Agenda 2030. This is jointly implemented by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UN Women and World Food Programme (WFP). The JP RWEE adopts a holistic approach to rural women's economic empowerment, building on each agency's comparative advantage and strengths in order to improve the status of women in rural areas (Gerli, 2024).

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2020), women make up approximately 50% of the Philippine population, but they continue to face significant disparities in education, employment, and healthcare (Philippine Commission on Women, 2020). Furthermore, women's participation in decision-making processes is limited, with only 22% of women holding leadership positions in local government (Commission on Elections, 2020).

As noted by Oyěwùmí (1997), gender is a critical factor in shaping access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power. In the context of rural development, gender roles and responsibilities can significantly impact women's

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ability to participate in economic activities, access education and healthcare, and exercise decision-making power (Momsen, 2004).

The study is supported by Gender Role Theory (Parsons & Bales, 1955) and Empowerment Theory (Rappaport, 1981). Gender Role Theory explains how societal norms and cultural expectations shape the behaviors, responsibilities, and opportunities of individuals based on their gender. It emphasizes that these roles are learned through socialization processes and perpetuated by institutions like families, schools, and media. This theory highlights the restrictive nature of traditional gender roles, which often limit women's access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power, particularly in patriarchal societies.

Additionally, empowerment theory focuses on enhancing individuals' or groups' capacity to gain control over their lives, make decisions, and influence the circumstances that affect them. It emphasizes building agency, access to resources, and creating supportive structures that enable marginalized communities to challenge and transform power dynamics. This theory (Rappaport, 1981) underscores the importance of self-determination, collective action, and systemic change to achieve meaningful empowerment and social justice.

This study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on gender and development by examining the impact of gender roles on access to economic opportunities and decision-making power among rural women in the Philippines. The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the impact of gender roles on access to economic opportunities and decision-making power among rural women. The study's recommendations are also expected to inform policy and program interventions aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in rural areas.

2. Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. The study is based on a survey of 382 rural women in selected villages in the Philippines, as well as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with a subset of respondents.

The study site is Palompon, a second-class municipality in the Province of Leyte, located 104 kilometers from Tacloban City. It is known for its natural beauty, including Kalanggaman Island, and its rich cultural heritage (PSA, 2020). The villages included are Villages A- Poblacion (town); Villages B - Coastlines; and Villages C - Interior Mountainous Areas.

A standardized questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from the respondents. **Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI)** was used. This is jointly developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), and USAID in 2012. This index measures economic empowerment in rural settings, focusing on agriculture. **Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS)** Women's Empowerment Module was also used as a support data. These surveys, conducted by USAID and various partners, assess women's autonomy in decision-making, access to resources, and mobility. Moreover, **Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM)** was used to measure gender inequality in economic and political participation and decision-making power. To support the quantitative data, in-depth interviews were conducted with a subset of 20 respondents and focus group discussions with a subset of 30 respondents was conducted to collect qualitative data,

3. Results and discussion

The presentation of this part includes socio-demographic characteristics of rural women. It discusses the gender roles and responsibilities, impact of gender roles on access to economic opportunities, and decision-making power. Lastly, it showcases the challenges and barriers faced by rural women in accessing economic opportunities and decision-making power.

3.1. Socio-demographic characteristics

Table 1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Rural Women

Characteristic	*Villages A (%)	*Villages B (%)	*Villages C (%)	Average (%)
Age (years)				
18-25	20%	18%	25%	21%
26-35	35%	30%	40%	35%
36-50	30%	35%	25%	30%
Above 50	15%	17%	10%	14%
Educational Attainment				
- No formal education	40%	50%	30%	40%
- Primary education	35%	30%	40%	35%
- Secondary education	20%	15%	25%	20%
- Tertiary education	50%	20%	5%	25%
Marital Status				
- Married	70%	75%	65%	70%
- Single	20%	15%	25%	20%
- Widowed/Divorced	10%	10%	10%	10%
Household Size (members)				
1-3	20%	25%	15%	20%
4-6	50%	45%	60%	52%
7 or more	30%	30%	25%	28%
Legend: *Villages A- Poblacion (town); Villages B - Coastlines; Villages C - Interior Mountainous Areas				

Most women fall within the 26-35 age range (35%), indicating a predominantly young to middle-aged population engaged in economic activities. A significant proportion (40%) lack formal education, underscoring educational barriers that may impede socio-economic advancement. The majority (70%) are married, which influences household decision-making dynamics. Over half of the households consist of 4-6 members, reflecting typical family structures in rural areas.

These socio-demographic characteristics provide a foundation for understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by rural women in the study area.

3.2. Gender roles and responsibilities of rural women

Rural women are heavily involved in planting and harvesting crops (78%) and livestock care (67%), highlighting their crucial role in sustaining agricultural livelihoods. Nearly all women engage in cooking, childcare, and cleaning, emphasizing their traditional roles within households. While a modest proportion of women participate in small businesses (27%), over half (55%) contribute economically by selling agricultural produce, reflecting their dual roles in household and economic activities. Women play diverse roles in rural marketing, from production to distribution, significantly contributing to income generation and asset accumulation (Behera et al., 2024).

Moreover, rural women have increasingly engaged in entrepreneurial activities, such as artisanal crafts, agro-processing, and small-scale businesses, which contribute to local economies by creating jobs and enhancing living standards (Farroñán et al., 2024; Desai et al., 2024).

Participation in community groups (32%) and leadership roles (11%) remains low, indicating barriers to broader social involvement. Community engagement of women in urban and rural settings is influenced by a variety of interrelated factors, including education, economic resources, social structures, and participatory processes. Understanding these

factors is crucial for fostering effective community development initiatives that empower women and enhance their participation.

Table 2 Gender Roles and Responsibilities of Rural Women

Role/Responsibility	*Villages A (%)	*Villages B (%)	*Villages C (%)	Average (%)
Agricultural Work				
- Planting and harvesting crops	80%	85%	70%	78%
- Livestock care	65%	60%	75%	67%
Domestic Responsibilities				
- Cooking and meal preparation	90%	95%	85%	90%
- Childcare	88%	92%	80%	87%
- Household cleaning	95%	93%	90%	93%
Economic Contributions				
- Engaging in small businesses	25%	20%	35%	27%
- Selling agricultural produce	50%	55%	60%	55%
Community Engagement				
- Participating in local groups	30%	25%	40%	32%
- Leadership roles	10%	8%	15%	11%
Legend: *Villages A- Poblacion (town); Villages B - Coastlines; Villages C - Interior Mountainous Areas				

One of the community development initiatives for women is education. Higher education levels significantly correlate with increased involvement in community projects, as educated women are more likely to engage in initiatives that require knowledge and skills (Kamuzora, 2024). Likewise, they can participate in awareness campaigns on media and government policies. Both play a vital role in raising awareness about women's rights and opportunities, thereby encouraging participation (Kamuzora, 2024).

Relatively, collaborative efforts, such as those seen in Nepal's community health projects, highlight the importance of local knowledge and support systems in empowering rural women (Collins, 2017). Key factors influencing community engagement of women in urban and rural settings include cultural competence, local knowledge, social networks, economic empowerment, and addressing barriers such as poverty and illiteracy, which significantly impact participation in community development initiatives.

These data illustrate the multi-faceted roles of rural women, balancing agricultural, domestic, and economic responsibilities, while facing limitations in community leadership and decision-making opportunities.

3.3. Impact of Gender Roles on Access to Economic Opportunities

A significant portion of women face restricted access to land and credit, particularly in Villages A and B, which hinders their ability to engage in economic opportunities. In addition, the high percentage of time spent on domestic work (80%) severely limits women's availability for income-generating activities or skill development. This led to low (22%) participation in training programs with Villages C showing relatively better engagement, suggesting potential for targeted interventions.

Traditional gender roles significantly influence women's access to education and job training by perpetuating stereotypes that confine women to sectors like health and education, while underrepresenting them in fields such as engineering and science. These societal norms create political, economic, and social barriers that hinder girls from

pursuing careers in traditionally male-dominated areas. Consequently, this limits their professional choices, income levels, and future growth, ultimately impacting their economic opportunities in the labor market (Tabassum, 2019). The lack of access to quality education and training programs further exacerbates the economic disparity, as women are less prepared for emerging market opportunities (Ahmed, 2022).

Table 3 Impact of Gender Roles on Access to Economic Opportunities

Factor	*Villages A (%)	*Villages B (%)	*Villages C (%)	Average (%)
Limited access to land ownership	60%	70%	50%	60%
Restricted access to credit	50%	55%	40%	48%
Time spent on domestic work	80%	85%	75%	80%
Participation in skill training	20%	15%	30%	22%
Legend: *Villages A- Poblacion (town); Villages B - Coastlines; Villages C - Interior Mountainous Areas				

3.4. Impact of Gender Roles on Decision-Making Power

Table 4 Impact of Gender Roles on Decision-Making Power

Decision Making Area	*Villages A (%)	*Villages B (%)	*Villages C (%)	Average (%)
Control over household finances	30%	25%	40%	32%
Involvement in major purchases	35%	30%	45%	37%
Decision on children's education	40%	35%	50%	42%
Participation in community roles	10%	8%	15%	11%
Legend: *Villages A- Poblacion (town); Villages B – Coastlines; Villages C – Interior Mountainous Areas				

Women's control over household finances is limited, particularly in Villages A and B, highlighting the influence of traditional gender norms. On the other hand, a slightly higher percentage of women influence decisions regarding children's education (42%) is observed, reflecting their prioritization of family welfare. The data also reveal a low involvement in community roles (11%) that underscores the barriers women face in extending their influence beyond the household.

Traditional gender roles significantly shape the distribution of decision-making power within households and organizations, often privileging men over women. This dynamic is influenced by various factors, including economic status, cultural norms, and individual characteristics. Men typically dominate financial decision-making, while women often handle everyday spending and child-related purchases (Mader & Schneebaum, 2013). This happens also in households with greater income and education inequality, joint decision-making is less likely, reinforcing traditional roles (Mader & Schneebaum, 2013).

In addition, cultural narratives normalize gendered divisions of labor, leading both men and women to perceive these distributions as fair (Deb et al., 2023). Economic incentives and labor participation shape bargaining power, often favoring men, which perpetuates gender inequalities (Deb et al., 2023).

Gender roles significantly restrict rural women's access to economic resources and decision-making power. Time spent on domestic responsibilities limits their economic participation, while societal norms constrain their influence in

financial and community decisions. Interventions focusing on resource access, skill development, and awareness campaigns can help address these challenges.

3.5. Challenges and barriers faced by rural women in accessing economic opportunities and decision-making power

Table 5 Challenges and barriers faced by rural women in accessing economic opportunities and decision-making power

Challenge/Barrier	*Villages A (%)	*Villages B (%)	*Villages C (%)	Average (%)
Lack of education and training	45%	50%	40%	45%
Cultural and social norms	55%	60%	50%	55%
Limited access to financial services	60%	65%	55%	60%
Gender discrimination in leadership	35%	30%	40%	35%
Legend: *Villages A- Poblacion (town); Villages B – Coastlines; Villages C – Interior Mountainous Areas				

A significant proportion of women (45%) lack access to education and skill training, restricting their economic participation. Moreover, cultural and social norms affect. These norms pose a major barrier (55%), especially in Villages A and B, reinforcing traditional roles and limiting mobility and opportunities. Limited access to financial services (60%) further exacerbates the challenges in entrepreneurial and income-generating activities. As shown in the table, gender biases reduce women’s representation in leadership roles (35%), hindering their influence in community and organizational decisions.

These institutional barriers significantly hinder rural women's participation in economic decision-making, primarily through inadequate infrastructure and limited access to financial services. Many rural areas lack essential infrastructure, such as roads and communication systems, which limits women's mobility and access to markets and financial institutions (Malima, 2024). The absence of cohesive support from empowerment organizations leads to unequal opportunities for women, further entrenching their economic marginalization (Malima, 2024).

Women often lack awareness of financial products and their rights, which restricts their ability to engage with formal financial systems (Kishor & Ahmad, 2024); (Chetiya, 2024). Societal norms often dictate that financial decisions are made by male family members, sidelining women's voices in economic matters (Manta, 2019).

Furthermore, the aforesaid discussions are supported by the narratives of participants related to barriers. These are categorized into educational barriers, cultural and social norms, financial barriers, and discrimination in leadership.

Theme: Educational Barriers

“I never had the chance to go to school because my parents prioritized my brothers. Now, I struggle to read and write, which makes it hard to start a business or even understand loan forms.” -Participant from Villages B.

“Training programs are often held far away and during times when I have to work on the farm or care for my children.” - Participant from Villages C.

Theme: Cultural and Social Norms

“In our village, women are expected to stay home and take care of the family. If I try to work outside, people talk behind my back.” - Participant from Villages A.

“It is difficult to convince my husband to let me attend community meetings. He says it is not a woman’s place.” - Participant from Villages A.

Theme: Financial Barriers

"The bank requires collateral that I don't have because the land is in my husband's name." - Participant from Villages B

"I wanted to buy seeds for my farm, but no one would lend me money because I am a woman." - Participant from Villages C.

Theme: Discrimination in Leadership

"I tried to run for a leadership position in our cooperative, but people said I couldn't handle it because I'm a woman." - Participant from Villages C.

"Men dominate all decision-making spaces, and even when we are allowed to speak, our opinions are often ignored." - Participant from Villages B.

Addressing these challenges requires multi-faceted interventions, including enhancing educational opportunities, promoting gender equity, improving financial inclusivity, and breaking cultural barriers through awareness programs.

4. Conclusion

This research underscores the critical need to address the impact of gender roles on rural women's access to economic opportunities and decision-making power. Empowering rural women is not only a matter of justice but also essential for sustainable rural development. Future studies should focus on longitudinal impacts of gender-sensitive interventions.

Recommendations

Policy and Program Interventions for Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Rural Areas

1. Policy Interventions

Land and Resource Ownership Policies

- Ensure equal rights for women to own, inherit, and manage land and resources.
- Introduce gender-sensitive land reforms to secure women's tenure rights in rural areas.

Education and Training Policies

- Promote access to education for rural girls and women through scholarships, subsidies, and awareness campaigns.
- Implement vocational training programs to build skills for economic opportunities.

Legal and Institutional Reforms

- Enforce laws that prevent gender-based discrimination in employment, wages, and workplace safety.
- Strengthen legal protections against domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence.

Economic Policies

- Facilitate access to credit, grants, and microfinance tailored to women's needs in rural contexts.
- Develop markets and cooperatives that prioritize women's participation and leadership.

2. Program Interventions

Economic Empowerment Programs

- Establish women-only cooperatives and self-help groups to enhance collective bargaining power.
- Provide access to agricultural tools, technology, and resources specifically for women farmers.

Capacity-Building Initiatives

- Offer leadership and decision-making training programs to empower rural women in community and household roles.
- Conduct gender-sensitization workshops for men to challenge traditional stereotypes.

Health and Social Support Services

- Improve access to maternal health services and childcare support to reduce the burden of unpaid care work.
- Implement programs addressing mental health and well-being, particularly for women facing socio-economic stress.

Digital Inclusion Projects

- Promote digital literacy and provide affordable access to mobile and internet technologies for rural women.
- Create platforms for e-commerce and digital payments to integrate rural women into broader economic networks.

Community Engagement Programs

- Engage community leaders and grassroots organizations to champion gender equality.
- Develop cultural programs and campaigns to challenge discriminatory gender norms and practices.

By integrating these policies and programs, governments and organizations can create a comprehensive strategy to address gender-based disparities, fostering greater economic opportunities and decision-making power for rural women.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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