

Challenges of Empowering Women in Ethiopia: The Case of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association (SWDA)

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Abstract: Women's empowerment remains a critical development priority in Ethiopia despite the existence of policies and institutional frameworks promoting gender equality. However, socio-cultural, economic, institutional, and policy implementation challenges continue to limit women's full participation in development. This study examined the challenges of women's empowerment through the case of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association (SWDA) in Sebeta Subcity, Oromia Region. A mixed-methods approach employing descriptive and explanatory research designs was adopted. Quantitative data were collected from 169 women members using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were gathered through 30 key informant interviews, three focus group discussions, and document review. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data, respectively. The findings revealed that traditional gender roles, cultural norms, wage inequality, limited access to finance, weak policy implementation, and low political representation remain major barriers to women's empowerment. The study further found that SWDA has made notable contributions to improving women's awareness of their rights, self-confidence, and livelihood skills. Nevertheless, inadequate funding, weak government collaboration, limited institutional capacity, poor stakeholder coordination, and persistent cultural resistance constrain the Association's effectiveness in promoting sustainable economic and leadership empowerment. The study concludes that strengthening institutional capacity, improving policy implementation, enhancing access to financial resources, fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration, and promoting community awareness are essential for advancing women's empowerment. The findings provide practical evidence for policymakers, development practitioners, and community-based organizations seeking to strengthen gender-responsive empowerment initiatives in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, gender equality, Siiqqee Women's Development Association, community-based organizations, institutional capacity, Ethiopia.

1. Introduction

1.2. Background of the study

Women's empowerment is widely recognized as a fundamental pillar of sustainable development, poverty reduction, and gender equality. Despite Ethiopia's policy commitments to promoting women's rights, many women continue to face social, economic, political, and cultural barriers that limit their access to education, employment, productive resources, leadership, and decision-making opportunities. Empowerment extends beyond access to resources to include women's ability to exercise agency, make strategic life choices, and participate equally in development processes (Batliwala, 1994; Rowlands, 1997; World Bank, 2001).

The Ethiopian government has introduced several legal and institutional frameworks to advance gender equality, including the National Policy on Ethiopian Women, gender mainstreaming initiatives, and the ratification of international conventions such as CEDAW. Nevertheless, the implementation of these policies remains uneven, particularly at the grassroots level, where women continue to experience discrimination, economic dependency, limited access to resources, and underrepresentation in leadership and public decision-making (UN Women, 2020; FDRE Ministry of

Women and Children Affairs, 2022; Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2007).

The Siiqqee Women's Development Association represents a community-based approach to promoting women's empowerment through economic support, capacity building, advocacy, and awareness creation. However, its effectiveness is constrained by inadequate institutional support, limited financial resources, weak stakeholder coordination, and persistent socio-cultural norms. Given the limited empirical evidence on the challenges facing grassroots women's associations in Ethiopia, this study investigates the internal and external factors affecting the Siiqqee Women's Development Association in Sebeta Subcity and provides evidence-based recommendations to strengthen women's empowerment initiatives (UN Women, 2020; World Bank, 2001; FDRE Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, 2022).

1.3. Research Questions

To examine the challenges of women's empowerment through the case of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association in Sebeta Subcity, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the major socio-economic, cultural, institutional, and policy-related factors that hinder women's empowerment in Sebeta Subcity?
2. To what extent has the Siiqqee Women's Development Association contributed to promoting the socio-economic empowerment of women in the study area?
3. What organizational and operational challenges affect the effectiveness of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association in achieving its objectives?
4. What strategies can be adopted to enhance the effectiveness of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association in promoting women's empowerment?

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Description of the Study Area

The study will focus on the Siiqqee Women's Development Association based in Sebeta Subcity, located in the Oromia region of Ethiopia. Sebeta is a rapidly urbanizing region, with a mix of rural and urban characteristics that influences the empowerment of women. The Siiqqee Women's Development Association is a local community-based organization that aims to enhance the socio-economic status of women, with a focus on overcoming gender inequality and promoting women's rights. This setting is ideal for examining how women's empowerment is addressed through local cooperative structures and the challenges that persist despite such efforts.

2.2. Research Paradigm, Design and Approach

Research Paradigm

This study will adopt a pragmatic paradigm, which allows for the combination of both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. This mixed-methods approach is essential for providing both measurable data and deep contextual insights into the experiences of women in Sebeta Sub city and the impact of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association.

Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods research design to provide a comprehensive analysis of women's empowerment in Sebeta Subcity. By integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study captured both the magnitude of women's empowerment and the contextual factors influencing it. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires to assess the prevalence and extent of women's empowerment among members of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and focus group

discussions (FGDs) to explore participants' lived experiences and generate in-depth insights into the socio-cultural, economic, institutional, and policy-related challenges affecting the empowerment process. The integration of these methods enabled triangulation of findings, thereby enhancing the validity and comprehensiveness of the study.

Research Approach

The study adopted both descriptive and explanatory research approaches. The descriptive approach was used to describe the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents and to present the current status of women's empowerment in the study area. The explanatory approach was employed to examine the underlying factors contributing to the challenges of women's empowerment and to assess the influence of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association on the socio-economic empowerment of women in Sebeta Subcity.

2.3. Types and Sources of Data

Types of Data

This study will collect both primary and secondary data:

Primary data will be obtained from women members of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association, local leaders, and government officials involved in gender empowerment policies. Primary data will be collected using questionnaires, interviews, and FGDs.

Secondary data will include existing reports, articles, government publications, and previous studies on women's empowerment and gender issues in Ethiopia

Sources of Data

Primary data sources: Women participants from the Siiqqee Women's Development Association, community leaders, local government officials, and representatives of organizations involved in gender empowerment.

Secondary data sources: Government reports on women's rights, empowerment, and gender equality, as well as research articles, and organizational documents from NGOs working in the region.

2.4. Sampling Design

Population and Sampling Frame

The target population for this study consists of women members of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association in Sebeta Subcity. There are approximately 300 women currently active in the association. These women will be the focus of the study.

Sampling Unit

The unit of analysis for the quantitative phase will be individual women, while the unit of analysis for the qualitative phase will be both individual participants (for interviews) and groups (for focus group discussions).

Sample Size Determination

To determine the sample size for the study, I will use Cochran's formula for sample size determination in a finite population. Cochran's formula is commonly used in social science research when calculating the sample size for a survey.

The formula for sample size (n) is:

$$n = \frac{z^2 \cdot p(1-p)}{E^2}$$

Where:

- n = Sample size
- Z = Z-value (for 95% confidence level, Z = 1.96)
- p = Estimated proportion of the population (if unknown, use 0.5 as the most conservative estimate)
- E = Margin of error (usually set at 0.05)

Given that the target population is 300 women, we apply the formula:

$$n = \frac{1.96^2 \cdot (0.5) \cdot 0.5}{0.05^2} = 384.6$$

Since the population is finite, we adjust the sample size using the finite population correction formula:

$$n_{adj} = \frac{n}{1 + \frac{n-1}{N}}$$

Where:

n = Sample size from Cochran's formula

N = Total population size

In my case, N = 300, so:

$$n_{adj} = \frac{384}{1 + \frac{384-1}{300}} = \frac{384}{1 + 1.28} = \frac{384}{2.28} \approx 169$$

Thus, the adjusted sample size is approximately 169 women from the Siiqqee Women's Development Association.

For the qualitative phase, 30 key informant interviews and 3 focus group discussions will be conducted. This sample size

is adequate for obtaining rich qualitative data and will provide insights into the personal and group dynamics of women's empowerment.

Sampling Techniques and Sampling Procedure

Stratified Random Sampling will be used for the quantitative data to ensure the sample is representative of various sub-groups (age, education level, involvement in the association, etc.).

Purposive Sampling will be used for the qualitative data collection (interviews and FGDs) to select participants who have in-depth knowledge of the issues related to women's empowerment in the region.

2.5. Data Collection Instruments

Survey/Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire will be developed, containing both closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaire will cover areas such as:

- Socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, marital status, education level, occupation family size and house hold income)
- Economic participation (e.g., income generation, financial independence)
- Social participation (e.g., participation in the Siiqqee Women's Development Association)
- Perceptions of empowerment and the challenges they face in their daily lives.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key informants, including community leaders and local officials. These interviews will explore deeper insights into the systemic challenges that women face in Sebeta, including cultural and social barriers to empowerment.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Three focus group discussions, each comprising 6-8 participants, will be conducted with women from the Siiqqee Women's Development Association. The discussions will provide qualitative data on collective experiences, perceptions, and attitudes towards women's empowerment.

2.6. Data Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity, the research instruments will be pre-tested in a similar community to ensure their effectiveness in capturing the intended data. Expert reviews and feedback will be sought to refine the tools. The validity of qualitative findings will also be enhanced through triangulation. The reliability of the questionnaire will be tested using Cronbach's

alpha. A value of 0.7 or above will be considered acceptable for internal consistency. For qualitative data, reliability will be ensured by documenting the interviews and using peer debriefing to validate the findings.

2.7. Methods of Data Analysis

Methods of Quantitative Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics (mean, frequency, percentage) will be used to summarize demographic characteristics and the extent of empowerment among the women.

Inferential Statistics: Techniques such as chi-square tests and regression analysis will be employed to assess relationships between socio-demographic factors and women's empowerment outcomes.

Methods of Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be used for analyzing interview and FGD transcripts. Themes will be coded and categorized to identify patterns regarding the barriers to empowerment and the role of the Siqqee Women's Development Association in overcoming these challenges.

2.8. Ethical Consideration

This study adheres to established research ethics. Participants will be fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and will provide informed consent before participation. Their privacy and confidentiality will be protected by ensuring anonymity and securely handling all collected data. Participants will also be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any penalty or adverse consequences.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Factors Hindering Women's Empowerment in Sebeta Subcity

The following table presents respondents' perceptions of the major socio-economic, cultural, institutional, and policy-related factors that hinder women's empowerment in Sebeta Subcity. Specifically, it summarizes the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents' views regarding the Table 1: Factors Hindering Women's Empowerment in Sebeta Subcity

key barriers affecting women's participation in economic, social, and leadership activities. The findings provide an overview of the multidimensional challenges that continue to limit women's empowerment in the study area.

Barrier type	Frequency(n)	Percentage (%)
Cultural beliefs & traditional practices	125	78.1%
Religious influence	118	73.8%
Gender role in house hold and community	130	81.3%
Limited access to credit/ finance	122	76.3%
Wage gap and job scarcity	127	79.4
Poor implementation of gender policies	115	71.9
Low representation in political leadership	108	65.5

The above table shows that gender roles within the household and community (81.3%) were identified as the most significant barrier to women's empowerment, followed by wage gaps and job scarcity (79.4%), cultural beliefs and traditional practices (78.1%), limited access to credit and finance (76.3%), religious influence (73.8%), poor implementation of gender policies (71.9%), and low representation of women in political leadership (67.5%). These findings indicate that women's empowerment in Sebeta Subcity is constrained by interconnected socio-economic,

cultural, and institutional factors rather than a single challenge. This finding supports the Gender and Development (GAD) Theory, which argues that achieving women's empowerment requires transforming unequal gender relations and institutional structures (Moser, 1993). It is also consistent with Naila Kabeer (1999), who emphasizes that unequal access to resources, agency, and opportunities limits women's empowerment, and with Assefa and Gebremedhin (2017), who found that cultural norms, economic constraints, and

weak institutional support remain major barriers to women's empowerment in Ethiopia.

3.2. Assessing the Contribution of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association to Women's Socio-Economic Empowerment

The following table presents respondents' perceptions of the major contributions of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association (SWDA) toward promoting the socio-economic

empowerment of women in Sebeta Subcity. It summarizes the key areas in which the Association has supported women through empowerment programs and related interventions.

Table 2: the Contribution of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association

Role/contribution area	Frequency(n)	Percentage (%)
Awareness creation and rights education	120	75%
Skill development and livelihood training	1188	73.8%
Psychological empowerment/confidence building	114	71.3%
Legal support and gender-based violence advocacy	95	59.4%
Encouraging political/ civic participation	88	55%
Networking and coalition building with other gap	72	45%

The above table shows that SWDA has contributed most to awareness creation and women's rights education (75%), followed by skill development and livelihood training (73.8%) and psychological empowerment through confidence building (71.3%). However, comparatively lower contributions were reported in legal support and advocacy against gender-based violence (59.4%), encouraging political and civic participation (55%), and networking with other stakeholders (45%). These findings suggest that the

Association has been more effective in strengthening women's knowledge, skills, and self-confidence than in promoting broader institutional and political empowerment. This finding is consistent with the Capability Approach, which emphasizes expanding individuals' capabilities through education and skills development (Sen, 1999), and with Kabeer (1999), who argues that access to knowledge and resources enhances women's agency and empowerment.

3.3. Participation and Benefits of Women in SWDA Programs

The following table presents respondents' participation in and benefits obtained from the programs implemented by the Siiqqee Women's Development Association. The results indicate the extent to which members have benefited from the

Association's interventions in different areas of empowerment.

Table 3: Women's Participation and Benefits in SWDA Programs

Participation and benefit of indicators	frequency	Percentage (%)
Regular attendance in training /workshops	112	70%
Improved awareness on women's rights	121	75%
Gained vocational /livelihood skills	107	66.90%
Started income-generating activity(IGA)	84	52.50%
Increased involvement in house hold decisions	97	60.60%
Participation in community leadership roles	61	38.10%

Accessed credit or small loans via SWDA support	76	47.50%
Reported personal confidence improvement	119	74.40%

The above table indicates that the greatest benefits reported by respondents were improved awareness of women's rights (75%), increased personal confidence (74.4%), and regular participation in training and workshops (70%). Similarly, many respondents gained vocational skills (66.9%) and reported greater involvement in household decision-making (60.6%). In contrast, fewer respondents started income-generating activities (52.5%), accessed credit services (47.5%), or participated in community leadership roles

(38.1%). These findings indicate that while SWDA has achieved notable progress in enhancing women's knowledge, confidence, and capacity, its contribution to sustainable economic and leadership empowerment remains relatively limited. This finding agrees with Assefa and Gebremedhin (2017), who found that women's associations improve awareness and skills but often face challenges in translating these gains into long-term economic opportunities due to limited financial and institutional support.

3.4. Organizational and Operational Challenges Affecting the Effectiveness of SWDA

The following table presents respondents' perceptions of the major organizational and operational challenges affecting the effectiveness of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association (SWDA) in achieving its objectives. It

summarizes the key constraints that hinder the Association's capacity to effectively implement women's empowerment programs in the study area.

Challenges	frequency	Percentage (%)
Inadequate funding	132	82.50%
Shortage of skilled staff	105	65.60%
Poor government collaboration/support	118	73.80%
Cultural resistance from community	123	76.90%
Inconsistent monitoring and evaluation	94	58.80%
Limited training logistics	101	63.10%
Poor infrastructure(e.g. office space, transport	85	53.10%

The above table shows that inadequate funding (82.5%) was identified as the most significant organizational challenge, followed by cultural resistance from the community (76.9%), poor government collaboration and support (73.8%), shortage of skilled staff (65.6%), limited training logistics (63.1%), inconsistent monitoring and evaluation (58.8%), and poor infrastructure (53.1%). These findings indicate that both internal capacity limitations and external institutional challenges reduce the effectiveness of SWDA in delivering sustainable women's empowerment programs. The findings

are consistent with Empowerment Theory, which emphasizes that organizations require adequate financial resources, institutional support, and organizational capacity to achieve sustainable empowerment outcomes (Zimmerman, 2000). They also agree with Okeke-Ihejirika (2011), who reported that women's development associations in Africa often face funding shortages, weak institutional collaboration, and limited organizational capacity, which constrain their effectiveness in promoting women's empowerment.

3.5. Policy and Institutional Strategies for Strengthening SWDA

The following table presents respondents' perceptions of the major policy and institutional gaps affecting the effectiveness of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association (SWDA) in promoting women's empowerment.

The findings identify key areas requiring policy and institutional improvements to strengthen the Association's role and enhance women's empowerment in Sebeta Subcity.

Table 5: Perceptions of Policy and Institutional Gaps

Policy and institutional gap indicators	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Policies supporting women's empowerment are clear	122	76.30%%
Policies are effectively implemented	45	28.10%
Women have equal access to government programs	51	31.90%
Local government provides sufficient support	40	25%
There is adequate funding for women's empowerment initiatives	38	23.80%
Institutional coordination between stakeholders is strong.	43	26.90%
Legal and institutional barriers exist for women.	101	63.10%

The above table indicates that while most respondents agreed that policies supporting women's empowerment are clear (76.3%), only a few believed that these policies are effectively implemented (28.1%). Similarly, respondents reported limited access to government programs (31.9%), inadequate government support (25%), insufficient funding for women's empowerment initiatives (23.8%), and weak institutional coordination among stakeholders (26.9%). Moreover, 63.1% acknowledged the existence of legal and institutional barriers affecting women. These findings suggest that the major challenge lies not in policy formulation but in policy

implementation, institutional commitment, and resource allocation. The findings are consistent with the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), which emphasizes that effective empowerment depends on accountable institutions, participation, and the enforcement of legal rights (UNDP, 2006). They also support the findings of UN Women (2020), which reported that despite the existence of gender-responsive policies in Ethiopia, weak implementation, limited institutional coordination, and inadequate financial support continue to undermine women's empowerment initiatives.

interventions will improve the effectiveness and sustainability of women's empowerment initiatives in Sebeta Subcity.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Conclusion

The study concludes that women's empowerment in Sebeta Subcity continues to be constrained by interconnected socio-cultural, economic, institutional, and policy implementation challenges. Although the Siiqqee Women's Development Association has made meaningful contributions by improving women's awareness of their rights, building confidence, and providing skills development opportunities, its impact on sustainable economic empowerment, access to finance, leadership participation, and institutional influence remains limited. The findings further indicate that inadequate funding, weak government support, poor stakeholder coordination, cultural resistance, and ineffective implementation of existing gender policies significantly reduce the Association's effectiveness in advancing women's empowerment.

4.2. Recommendation

The study recommends strengthening the institutional and financial capacity of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association through increased government commitment, stronger partnerships with development organizations, and sustainable resource mobilization. Efforts should also focus on improving the implementation of gender policies, expanding women's access to credit and livelihood opportunities, promoting leadership and decision-making participation, enhancing stakeholder coordination, and implementing continuous community awareness programs to address harmful socio-cultural norms. These integrated

5. References

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