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From silence to power:
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1 Introduction

Women's exclusion from formal economic and political decision-making remains a persistent challenge across much of the Global South, despite their central roles in sustaining household welfare (Bank 2012, Quisumbing & Doss 2021). Household welfare here refers to the well-being of household members in

terms of income security, food availability, health, and children's education, as well as women's contributions to agricultural production and community resilience (Quisumbing & Doss 2021). This marginalisation is particularly visible in rural contexts where deeply embedded patriarchal norms continue to shape access to resources and authority. Patriarchal norms often manifest through male

control over land, dominance in household decision-making, and limited acceptance of women in leadership positions (Pelzer et al. 2017). As a result, women often face constraints in accessing productive assets, financial services, and institutional leadership opportunities (Pelzer et al. 2017, Quisumbing & Doss 2021).

Within such contexts, co-operatives, member-owned and democratically governed enterprises formed to meet shared economic and social needs, have increasingly been promoted as institutional spaces through which smallholders can engage in collective enterprise, improve market access, and strengthen bargaining power (Münkner 2015). However, the effectiveness of co-operatives is uneven (Rwekaza & Anania 2020). Governance challenges, unequal participation, and elite capture may limit their transformative potential, while alternative organisational arrangements such as producer groups, private enterprises, or contract farming may also shape rural economic opportunities (Birchall 2017). Beyond their economic functions, co-operatives have attracted growing scholarly and policy interest for their potential to serve as sites of empowerment, solidarity, and collective voice, particularly among marginalised groups and small-scale producers (Coop 2016, World Bank 2020).

In Tanzania, where women constitute a substantial proportion of the agricultural workforce, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions and land ownership structures (URT 2019). In response, the government has increasingly promoted co-operatives as mechanisms for rural transformation and inclusive economic participation. National policy frameworks like the Co-operative Development Policy and the Agricultural Sector

Development Programme Phase II (URT 2016), Identify farmer organisations and co-operatives as key vehicles for strengthening smallholder market participation and improving rural livelihoods (URT 2017).

The Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative in the Kilimanjaro region provides an important case for examining these dynamics (FAO 2011). The dairy sector in many rural African contexts exhibits gendered divisions of labour, where women frequently undertake daily livestock management activities such as feeding, milking, and animal care, while men retain greater control over productive assets and marketing decisions (FAO 2023, Njuki et al. 2011). Women-led co-operatives, therefore, represent potentially significant institutional spaces through which they may reorganise production systems, enhance bargaining power, and gain greater public visibility within local economies (Quisumbing & Doss 2021, Agarwal 2010). However, key questions remain: To what extent do such co-operative spaces challenge entrenched gender norms, and how far do they expand women's voices beyond economic participation?

A women's co-operative can be understood as a member-owned and democratically governed enterprise in which women make up the majority of members and leadership, collectively pursuing shared economic and social goals. Existing literature provides valuable but incomplete insights into the outcomes of such organisations. Earlier studies highlight the role of co-operatives in improving women's access to financial resources, agricultural inputs, and markets (Iyer 2020). Nevertheless, some scholars warn that economic inclusion does not necessarily lead to greater decision-making power or social recognition, especially where patriar-

chal norms continue to influence daily social relations (Kyazze et al. 2017, Osmani 1993). Without intentional institutional reforms that encourage meaningful participation and leadership opportunities, co-operatives may inadvertently reinforce gender hierarchies, positioning women in supportive or symbolic roles rather than positions of influence (Boudet et al. 2018).

Recent feminist scholarship has called for a deeper examination of co-operatives as social and political institutions where gendered power relations may be contested and renegotiated (Agarwal 2010, Cornforth 2014). Empirical evidence from several African contexts suggests that women's participation in cooperative organisations can strengthen collective identity, expand economic opportunities, and enhance participation in community decision-making (ILO 2015, Majurin 2012). Nevertheless, empowerment outcomes remain uneven and context-dependent. While cooperative membership may improve market access and income opportunities, shifts in intra-household decision-making, community perceptions of women's leadership, and women's ability to exercise public voice often occur gradually and remain insufficiently documented (Doss 2013, Quisumbing & Doss 2021).

Consequently, empirical research examining how women-led co-operatives function as arenas for negotiating gender norms, leadership, and social influence remains relatively limited, particularly in rural Sub-Saharan Africa. Understanding whether and how such organisations contribute to transformations in household power relations and community governance, therefore, remains an important area of inquiry.

This study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of members of the Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative. It explores how participation in the co-operative shapes women's ability to speak, lead, and negotiate their social standing within both household and community contexts. The analysis is grounded in Empowerment Theory (Kabeer 1999), which conceptualises empowerment as the expansion of strategic life choices through the interconnected dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements. Feminist Co-operative Theory (Craig & Pencavel 1992) further provides a lens for analysing how collective organisation and democratic governance structures may create opportunities for women to challenge institutionalised inequalities and build collective agency.

At the same time, recent critical scholarship argues that empowerment initiatives focusing solely on women may have limited transformative effects if broader gender relations remain unchanged (Mwiine et al. 2026). Drawing on the concept of hegemonic masculinity developed by Raewyn Connell, this perspective highlights that meaningful gender transformation often requires engaging men, renegotiating dominant gender norms, and strengthening women's agency. Empowerment, therefore, emerges not only as an individual process but also as a relational one shaped by interactions between women, men, and community institutions.

Together, these theoretical perspectives allow empowerment to be analysed not merely as an economic outcome but as an evolving social, political, and organisational process. Rather than focusing exclusively on productivity or income indicators, this study examines how cooperative membership reshapes

women's everyday experiences. In particular, it explores changes in women's confidence to speak in public forums, their participation in leadership and collective decision-making, and their ability to negotiate roles and authority within households and community institutions. By foregrounding these relational dimensions, the study examines whether women-led co-operatives can serve as spaces for voice, negotiation, and gradual social transformation in rural Tanzania.

2 Conceptualisation of women's empowerment

The conceptual framework that underpins this study is presented in Figure 1. The model conceptualises women's empowerment as a dynamic and multi-stage process through which cooperative participation enables women to move from historical marginalisation ("Silence") to active engagement and expression ("Voice"), strengthened agency and influence ("Power"), and ultimately broader community-level impact ("Social Transformation"). This transformative pathway draws on Empowerment Theory, which conceptualises empowerment as the expansion of resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer 1999), as well as scholarship on cooperative and collective enterprises, which emphasises the role of participatory organisations in shaping economic participation, decision-making, and institutional power (Craig & Pencavel 1992, Birchall 2013). Together, these perspectives highlight the relational, organisational, and structural mechanisms through which women's empowerment may unfold within cooperative institutions.

1. Silence: This stage represents women's initial condition of marginalisation, shaped by patriarchal norms, restrictive cultural expectations, limited confidence, and exclusion from cooperative governance structures. Silence reflects not only the absence of voice but the presence of structural barriers that constrain women's participation in decision-making.

2. Voice: At this stage, women begin to articulate their opinions, participate in meetings, and engage with cooperative processes. Voice signifies enhanced confidence, increased visibility, and a shift from passive membership to active participation. It also marks the early emergence of agency as women recognise their right to speak and be heard.

3. Power: This stage captures women's ability to influence decisions, assume leadership roles, command respect, and secure access to material and social resources. Power encompasses both individual agencies, such as confidence and assertiveness, and collective power arising from solidarity, shared identity, and collective action within the cooperative.

4. Social transformation: The final stage reflects broader shifts beyond the cooperative as empowered women begin to influence gender norms, lead community initiatives, and inspire younger generations. Social transformation includes increased community respect for women, improved intra-household negotiation power, and expanded contributions to local economic development and cooperative governance.

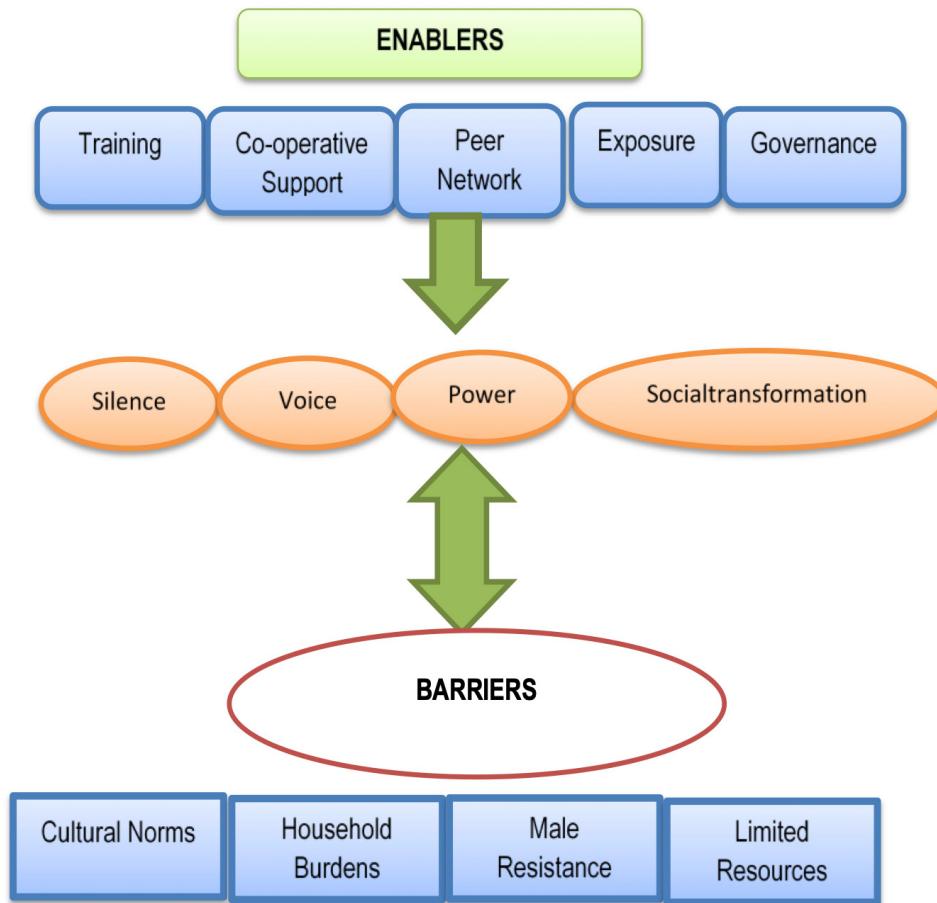


Figure 1 Conceptual model of women's transformation in co-operatives

Together, these four interconnected stages frame empowerment not as a singular economic outcome but as a holistic, multi-level process that evolves through cooperative participation and collective organisation. The framework, therefore, provides a lens for analysing how women navigate and negotiate voice, power, and social change within and beyond the Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative.

The model assumes that co-operative participation, training, peer support, and institutional inclusion act as enablers

moving women along this transformation pathway, while cultural norms, time burdens, and male resistance act as barriers.

3 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case study research design to enable an in-depth examination of women's participation within the Kalali Women Dairy Cooperative. The designs are particularly appropriate when the researcher seeks to explore complex social

phenomena within their real-life context and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Levitt et al. 2018). Qualitative approaches are well-suited for investigating participants' experiences, meanings, and social interactions within specific institutional settings, allowing researchers to capture the depth and nuance of lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell 2016). By focusing on the Kalali Women Dairy Cooperative, the study provides a detailed exploration of how women interpret their participation in the cooperative and how such participation shapes their voice, agency, and pathways toward social transformation within the local community.

Empowerment, voice, and social transformation are complex social constructs that are difficult to quantify and are more effectively understood through narrative accounts, meaning-making processes, and subjective interpretation (Creswell & Poth 2018). The qualitative case study design, therefore, offers methodological flexibility to foreground women's perspectives, recognise contextual influences, and situate the findings within the socio-cultural realities of rural Tanzania.

3.1 Study area and case selection

The study was conducted at Nanenane ground during the Agricultural Exhibition in Dodoma. However, the home area for the Kalali dairy women's group is in Kalali Village, situated in the Kilimanjaro Region of northern Tanzania. The area is characterised by smallholder farming, where dairy farming significantly contributes to local livelihoods. The Kilimanjaro region has a longstanding tradition of cooperative organisation and mobile agri-

culture, particularly in coffee and dairy value chains. Many farmer associations and dairy cooperatives operate throughout the wider area, supporting milk collection, access to inputs, and collective marketing arrangements.

Despite this cooperative presence, gender inequalities are still evident in many rural producer organisations. Women often contribute significant labour to dairy production and livestock management, but frequently have limited control over productive assets such as land and cattle, and limited representation in cooperative leadership and decision-making structures. The Kalali Women Dairy Cooperative was deliberately chosen for this study because it is a women-led cooperative operating within this broader institutional environment. Unlike most mixed-gender cooperatives in the region, the Kalali cooperative mainly consists of women members engaged in collective dairy production and marketing. This organisational structure provides a relevant institutional setting to explore how women's collective organisation can create opportunities to enhance voice, leadership, and participation both within households and in the community.

The cooperative operates within a socio-cultural setting where men have historically held decision-making power within households, community institutions, and agricultural organisations. Although women significantly contribute to agricultural production in northern Tanzania, their involvement in public decision-making forums and leadership positions has traditionally been limited. In this context, the Kalali Women Dairy Cooperative offers a valuable example of how collective organisation can support women's participation in public roles, influence economic decisions,

and gradually challenge established gender norms.

Participation in the cooperative may expand women's economic engagement through collective milk marketing and income generation, while also contributing to broader social changes, including increased confidence in public speaking, greater involvement in cooperative leadership, enhanced participation in household financial decisions, and improved recognition of women's contributions within the community. Although the cooperative has gained recognition for boosting women's economic participation, its potential to bring about broader social and relational changes remains insufficiently documented.

3.2 Participant selection and sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals with rich experiential knowledge relevant to the study's objectives (Patton 2015). The inclusion criteria required participants to be active members of the Kalali Women Dairy Cooperative, to have at least five years of membership, and to demonstrate sustained involvement in cooperative activities or leadership roles. Participants were also expected to reflect on changes in women's roles, agency, and social status within the cooperative context. A total of seven key informants participated in the study, including five cooperative members (three of whom held leadership positions), one District Cooperative Officer, and one Regional Cooperative Officer. The inclusion of both internal cooperative members and external cooperative officers enabled triangulation of perspectives on cooperative governance, gender dynamics, and empowerment processes.

3.3 Data collection methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit narratives regarding women's participation, leadership experiences, voices in decision-making, and perceived processes of social transformation. Interviews were conducted during the Nanenane Agricultural Exhibition in Dodoma, which provided a neutral and accessible environment for participants. All interviews were conducted in Kiswahili, the participants' preferred language, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis. Field notes and reflective memos were also maintained throughout the data collection process to capture contextual observations, non-verbal cues, and the researcher's reflexive insights. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw, were strictly observed throughout the research process.

3.4 Data analysis

The collected data were analysed thematically following the six-phase analytical procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to develop familiarity with the data and identify preliminary patterns. Initial codes were generated through open coding, combining inductive insights emerging from participants' narratives with deductive codes informed by the interview guide and the study's conceptual framework, including constructs such as silence, voice, power, and social transformation. The coded

data were subsequently organised into broader categories through axial coding, identifying relationships and patterns across data segments.

These categories were refined into coherent sub-themes, including decision-making participation, confidence development, household dynamics, leadership experiences, and structural barriers. The sub-themes were further synthesised into higher-order analytical themes aligned with the study's conceptual model, namely Silence, Voice, Power, and So-

cial Transformation, which capture the multi-level empowerment processes experienced by women within the cooperative context. The resulting themes were reviewed and refined to ensure conceptual clarity, internal coherence, and alignment with the theoretical framework. A comprehensive codebook was developed to guide interpretation and maintain analytical transparency.

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Background	Identity and roles	Participant's background and co-operative role
	Motivation	Reasons for joining the co-operative
	Expectations	Initial hopes and fears
Women's Voice	Decision-making	Participation in leadership and decisions
	Recognition	Seriousness given to women's ideas
	Confidence	Growth in voice and assertiveness
Empowerment	Economic change	Improved income and financial independence
	Household dynamics	Power shifts at home
	Personal freedom	Confidence and autonomy
	Community perception	Changed social attitudes
	Community initiatives	Women-led non-dairy actions

Challenges	Cultural barriers	Norms restricting women
	Family pressures	Domestic constraints
	Co-operative barriers	Internal structural obstacles
	Silencing	Incidents of discouragement
Strengthening Voice	Training	Capacity-building needs
	Leadership	Leadership advancement strategies
	Male engagement	Role of men in empowerment
Vision	Co-operative growth	Future aspirations for the co-operative
	Women's Role	Future women's contributions
	Messages	Advice to other co-operatives
Final Reflections	Personal Stories	Any additional insights

Table 1 Coding Framework from the KII

Code name	Code description
Background & entry	Describes participants' identities, roles within the cooperative, motivations for joining, and their initial expectations or fears upon entry.
Voice & participation	Captures women's involvement in decision-making processes, the extent to which their opinions are valued, and their growth in confidence and public expression within cooperative spaces.
Empowerment & personal change	Reflects economic empowerment, increased control over household decisions, personal confidence, and expanded autonomy resulting from cooperative membership.

Community-level transformation	Represents broader social changes, including increased respect for women, greater visibility in community events (e.g., Nanenane), shifting gender norms, and women-led community initiatives.
Barriers & constraints	Covers cultural, social, familial, and institutional challenges that limit women's participation or attempt to silence their voices.
Strategies for strengthening women's voice	Highlights proposed actions, such as training, leadership development, cooperative education, and male engagement, to enhance women's voices and influence.
Future vision & aspirations	Encompasses women's hopes for cooperative growth, expanded roles for women, improved infrastructure, and messages of encouragement for other women's cooperatives.

Table 2 Coding framework

3.5 Trustworthiness of the study and coding framework overview

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed, including member checking, peer debriefing, informant triangulation, and maintaining an audit trail documenting coding decisions and reflexive analytical notes throughout the analysis.

4 Findings and discussion

The findings demonstrate a progressive empowerment journey through which members of the Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative navigate processes of voice, agency, and social transformation. Supported by Empowerment Theory (Kabeer 1999), women's empowerment develops through the interconnected dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements, with each phase reflecting a shift from limited choices to enhanced capa-

bility and influence. The cooperative functions not only as an economic institution but also as a transformative social space that enables women to renegotiate power relations at individual, household, and community levels.

4.1 Historical marginalisation and structural constraints

Women's narratives indicate that prior to joining the co-operative, their participation in dairy production was shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms, limited access to productive resources, and restricted involvement in household and community decision-making. Although women played a central role in sustaining dairy farming activities, their economic contributions were rarely accompanied by control over assets or income.

Participants described undertaking most of the daily labour associated with dairy production. Their responsibilities included

herding cattle to grazing areas, collecting fodder, feeding and watering animals, cleaning cattle sheds, milking cows, and transporting milk to local buyers or collection points. Women were also involved in preparing supplementary feed, caring for calves, maintaining hygiene around cowsheds, and occasionally processing milk into fermented dairy products for household consumption. Despite this extensive involvement in the production process, ownership of key productive resources, such as cattle, land, and dairy equipment, was typically held by husbands or other male household members.

This imbalance extended beyond labour and into household decision-making. Women explained that men commonly determined when milk would be sold, how the income from milk sales would be used, and whether new livestock or farm inputs would be purchased. As a result, women's participation in economic decision-making remained limited even though they contributed substantially to the labour required to sustain dairy production. As one participant summarised: "We did most of the work, but men decided everything."

Cultural norms also constrained women's participation in public and community decision-making spaces. Several participants noted that speaking during village meetings, farmer groups, or local gatherings was often discouraged. Women explained that challenging men's opinions in public could be perceived as disrespectful, discouraging many from expressing their views even when they had practical knowledge of dairy production. As one respondent described:

Cultural norms discouraged women from speaking publicly. Even if you had an idea, you

kept quiet because people would say women should not challenge men.

These experiences reflect what Kabeer (1999) conceptualises as disempowerment, where individuals' capacity to make meaningful choices is constrained by structural and cultural norms. In the case of these women, such constraints manifested as unequal asset ownership, limited control over income, and restricted participation in decision-making at both the household and community levels. Consequently, women's contributions to dairy production were often treated as invisible labour, reinforcing their economic dependence despite their central role in sustaining household livelihoods. Similar patterns have been documented across rural Sub-Saharan Africa, where gender hierarchies shape both the division of labour and women's perceptions of their economic rights and entitlements (Cornwall & Rivas 2015).

Against this backdrop of structural marginalisation, participation in the Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative emerged as an important institutional space through which women began to renegotiate these constraints. While broader gender norms within households and communities remain influential, the co-operative provided opportunities for women to engage in training, collective marketing, and organisational leadership. Importantly, involvement in the co-operative did not replace women's responsibilities within family dairy enterprises. Instead, participants explained that cooperative engagement operates alongside their household farming activities, providing an additional platform for accessing knowledge, strengthening bargaining power, and participating in collective decision-making.

The Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative is predominantly women-led, with only a small number of male members participating in supportive roles. Women therefore occupy most leadership and decision-making positions within the organisation, including committee membership, financial management, and operational planning. Participants emphasised that this female-dominated structure created an environment in which they felt more comfortable speaking in meetings, sharing ideas, and contributing to decisions regarding milk marketing, savings schemes, and training programmes. One participant described this transformation as follows:

Through joining the cooperative, I am no longer silent. The cooperative provides education, training, and capacity-building programs. My own income now empowers me, but before it was not.

These experiences suggest that while structural inequalities have not disappeared entirely, the co-operative has created new opportunities for women to exercise voice, build confidence, and participate more actively in economic decision-making. For the women in Kalali, co-operative membership therefore represents an important step in the empowerment process, enabling them to gradually challenge the social norms that previously limited their participation in household and community governance.

4.2 Participation, confidence building, and emerging agency

Women's participation in the co-operative marked an important shift from silence

to voice, particularly within the organisational space created by the co-operative itself. Through regular meetings, training sessions, and collective activities, women began participating more actively in discussions, sharing ideas, and raising concerns with increasing confidence. Participants described initial discomfort with public speaking, shaped by long-standing social norms that discouraged women from expressing opinions in community forums. Over time, however, repeated participation in co-operative meetings, encouragement from peers, and supportive leadership helped many women gradually build the confidence to speak. One participant reflected:

At first, I could not speak in front of people, but through the co-operative I learned to express myself." Another added: "Now, when we meet, I know my voice matters.

Importantly, these changes did not necessarily imply that broader community norms had fundamentally shifted. Several participants indicated that outside the co-operative setting, women's growing independence was sometimes viewed critically by others in the community. As a result, empowerment was often described not as the elimination of social constraints but as the development of confidence and collective support that enabled women to pursue their economic activities despite such expectations. In this sense, co-operative participation created a protected space where women could exercise voice and leadership, even while broader gender norms continued to require ongoing negotiation in their daily lives.

These experiences reflect the emergence of agency, as described in Empowerment Theory, where women develop the capacity to articu-

late preferences, make strategic choices, and participate meaningfully in collective decision-making processes (Kabeer 1999 & 2001). Within the cooperative, women were provided with a structured and inclusive environment in which they were not only encouraged but also expected to speak, vote, and assume responsibilities in organisational activities. Such institutional openness resonates with feminist institutional perspectives, which emphasise that participatory organisational arrangements can challenge entrenched gender power relations by creating spaces where women develop legitimacy, belonging, and collective confidence in decision-making processes (Acker 1990, Kabeer 1999). In this context, voice serves as both a symbolic and a practical entry point to empowerment, enabling women to transition from passive observers to active contributors and decision-makers within cooperative institutions.

Importantly, this newfound voice extended beyond the co-operative. Participants explained that the confidence gained through co-operative engagement enabled them to participate more assertively in community meetings and public events. One woman proudly shared her experience at the Nanenane agricultural exhibition, noting, “Now I am here at Nanenane selling and marketing our products,” emphasising how cooperative participation opened avenues for public visibility, entrepreneurship, and market engagement. This expanded presence aligns with Kabeer’s (1999) and Velthouse’s (1990) arguments that empowerment is relational and cumulative, whereby small acts of agency create ripple effects across multiple social domains.



Figure 2. Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative members showcasing their dairy products during the NaneNane Agricultural Exhibition in Dodoma. The exhibition provided a platform for women to market their products, demonstrate their entrepreneurial skills, and enhance their cooperative's visibility within the broader agricultural community.

Collectively, these findings show that voice, cultivated through participation, learning, and solidarity, served as a gateway to broader empowerment. It allowed women to challenge previous norms of silence, assert their perspectives, and position themselves as credible actors within both the cooperative and their wider community.

4.3 Leadership, influence, and control over resources

As women's voices strengthened within the co-operative, several members gradually moved into positions of visible and recognised leadership. This emerging authority was reflected not only in formal leadership roles but also in women's growing influence over organisational decisions and control over income generated through dairy activities. Participants occupying leadership positions described taking responsibility for coordinating co-operative meetings, managing milk collection schedules, overseeing financial records, and representing the co-operative in negotiations with buyers, extension officers, and local government representatives.

For example, some women explained that they now chair meetings in which members discuss milk pricing, the distribution of training opportunities, and savings contributions. Others described their involvement in negotiating milk sales with traders or collection centres to ensure that members receive fair prices for their produce. One committee member noted that her role included maintaining financial records, monitoring cooperative savings, and reporting on income from milk sales at monthly meetings.

Leadership also translated into greater control over dairy-related income at the household level. Several women reported that earnings from milk marketed through the cooperative were deposited into their own savings accounts or managed through the cooperative's savings schemes. This allowed them to contribute directly to household expenses, such as school fees and food purchases, or to reinvest in livestock. As one participant explained, managing

dairy income through the cooperative enabled her to make financial decisions that previously would have been handled exclusively by male household members.

These experiences reflect what Kabeer (1999) describes as the achievement dimension of empowerment, where expanded agency leads to tangible changes in power relations and outcomes. In this case, women's participation in leadership roles, their involvement in negotiating milk sales, and their increased control over cooperative income illustrate how collective organisation can translate into concrete shifts in authority and economic decision-making.

Economic empowerment also played a central role in expanding women's influence. Members consistently emphasised that earning and managing dairy income enhanced their bargaining power at home. One woman explained, "Now I can decide how to use the income. It has changed how my husband listens to me." Another noted the broader social recognition she gained: "People now come to me for guidance, even men." These narratives highlight how control over resources not only improves economic well-being but also elevates women's symbolic and relational power in both household and public arenas.

The co-operative itself provides an enabling institutional environment that normalises women's leadership and decision-making authority. Meetings are now more inclusive, transparency has improved, and younger women are encouraged to join committees and leadership pathways. This organisational shift disrupts traditional gender hierarchies and reinforces women's legitimacy as leaders. Figure (3) further illustrates this transformation.



Figure 3 Members of the Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative confidently showcasing their dairy products during the Nanenane agricultural exhibition in Dodoma, standing alongside a PhD researcher from the University of Dodoma who was collecting field data.

This interaction illustrates how cooperative members increasingly participate in public economic spaces. During the exhibition, the women presented their dairy products, explained their production process to visitors, responded to questions from potential buyers, and promoted the cooperative's activities to agricultural stakeholders. Several members also engaged directly with extension officers and representatives from agricultural organisations. Such participation reflects their

growing confidence in representing the cooperative beyond their local community.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative serves as a transformative institutional platform through which women attain economic power, organisational influence, and social recognition. Their leadership and visibility, captured both in narratives and in field interactions, such as the Nanenane exhibition, highlight a profound shift from earlier marginalisation toward sustained, socially acknowledged empowerment.

4.4 Social transformation redefining gender norms and community recognition

The final stage of the empowerment pathway reflects a broader social transformation, as women's increased agency and leadership within the Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative extend outward into the wider community. Participants consistently reported that their enhanced visibility, confidence, and organisational competence have begun to shift long-standing gender norms in their village. One member observed, "People in the village now see us as leaders, not just helpers," underscoring a significant departure from earlier perceptions that confined women to subordinate or supportive roles.

This transformation is also reflected in the co-operative's public engagement, including participation in the Nanenane Agricultural Exhibition in Dodoma. As shown in the attached photo, members showcased their dairy products and interacted confidently with visitors alongside the PhD researcher, illustrating their growing visibility and participation in public economic spaces.

The influence of this transformation also extends to younger generations. Women noted that girls in the community increasingly observe and engage with the co-operative's activities, often accompanying their mothers to meetings, training sessions, and milk collection points. Participants explained that seeing women chair meetings, manage cooperative finances, and negotiate milk sales has begun to reshape younger girls' perceptions of possible roles for women.

Several respondents described how girls now show greater willingness to speak during youth gatherings, participate in agricultural training programmes, and express interest in managing dairy activities in the future. One participant observed that her daughter, who previously viewed dairy work as routine household labour, now asks questions about how milk is marketed and how the cooperative operates. As another participant stated, "Girls see us and believe they can also lead."

These observations suggest that the empowerment experienced by cooperative members is not confined to individual participants but may influence the aspirations and behaviours of younger women within the community. In this sense, cooperative participation contributes to subtle yet meaningful shifts in how the next generation imagines leadership, economic participation, and women's roles. Such dynamics reflect the relational nature of empowerment highlighted in feminist scholarship, where individual gains can gradually influence broader social expectations and possibilities.

External stakeholders also recognise these changes. A regional cooperative officer noted that "The co-operative has changed how the community sees women's capacity," affirming

that the transformation is not only experienced internally but is also visible and acknowledged by relevant institutional actors. This visibility is critical, as it helps legitimise women's leadership and strengthens their influence in formal and informal community structures.

The combination of public participation, intergenerational influence, and external recognition illustrates what Kabeer (1999) terms transformative agency, a stage in which women not only expand their own life choices but also reshape the social norms and structures that once constrained them. Through their collective achievements, the Kalali women have become catalysts for community-level transformation, redefining gender expectations and contributing to a more inclusive social order.

5 Conclusion

This study explored how participation in the Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative influences women's voice, agency, and everyday experiences of empowerment. The findings demonstrate a gradual journey towards empowerment, where women move from historically restricted roles to greater involvement in economic and organisational decision-making. Consistent with Empowerment Theory, the results indicate that empowerment develops through interconnected processes involving access to resources, the strengthening of agency, and the realisation of tangible outcomes.

The cooperative acts as a supportive institutional space where women build confidence, participate in governance, and gain greater control over income from dairy production. Through cooperative meetings, training programmes, and collective support, members de-

velop the ability to express their views, take on leadership roles, and negotiate decisions within their households and communities. While broader gender norms remain influential, participation in the cooperative allows women to exercise greater autonomy and gradually renegotiate existing power relations.

The study also emphasises the wider social importance of women-led cooperatives in rural areas. Besides economic gains, the Kalali Women Dairy Co-operative increases women's public visibility, boosts their organisational skills, and offers younger women and girls alternative examples of leadership and involvement. These results imply that cooperatives can provide valuable spaces where women collectively broaden their voice and economic prospects, even in settings where traditional gender roles remain.

Generally, the findings emphasise the importance of gender-responsive cooperative policies and capacity-building initiatives that support women's leadership, financial inclusion, and collective organisation. Enhancing such institutional spaces can contribute to more inclusive rural development by enabling women to participate more actively in economic and community life. Future research should examine how similar cooperative models can be adapted across different contexts and sectors to further support women's empowerment and collective agency.

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Appendix: Interview guide

SECTION A: Background information (Contextual anchor)

1. Please tell me about yourself and your role in the co-operative.
 - o How long have you been involved?
 - o What motivated you to join?
 - o What were your expectations at the beginning?

SECTION B: Women's voice and participation (voice, agency)

2. In what ways are women involved in decision-making within the co-operative?
 - o Are women represented in leadership positions?
 - o Who makes the final decisions?
3. Do you feel your opinions or ideas are taken seriously within the co-operative? Why or why not?
 - o Can you give an example of a time your voice influenced a decision?
 - o How do meetings encourage or limit women's participation?
4. How has your confidence or ability to speak up changed since joining the co-operative? (Empowerment, self-efficacy)
 - o Were you comfortable speaking in public before?
 - o Do you now participate in other community meetings?

SECTION C: Empowerment and social transformation (personal & social change)

5. How has participation in the co-operative changed your life? (Personal empowerment)
- o Economically?
 - o In your household/marriage?
 - o In your confidence or freedom?
6. Have you observed any changes in how women are viewed in the wider community? (Social transformation)
- o Are women more respected now?
 - o Are more girls or young women joining or aspiring to lead?
7. Have co-operative members taken part in solving community problems beyond dairy farming?
- o What kind of initiatives or changes have women led?
 - o Any recent example?

SECTION D: Challenges and resistance (structural barriers)

8. What barriers or challenges do women face in raising their voices or participating fully?
- o Cultural norms?
 - o Family expectations?
 - o Time or resource constraints?
9. Have you ever been discouraged or silenced (directly or indirectly) in your participation?
- o By leaders?
 - o By male members or family?

SECTION E: Vision and sustainability (transformative potential)

10. What do you think should be done to strengthen women's voices in the co-operative?
- More training?
 - Leadership opportunities?
 - Men's involvement?
11. What is your vision for the future of the co-operative and women's role in it?
- In five years, what would you like to see?
 - Any message to other women co-operatives?

SECTION F: Final reflection

12. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a woman in this co-operative?