

Women to Women Research for Economic Empowerment in Uganda: A Feminist Participatory Action Research Project

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Abstract

This paper reports on a two-tiered Feminist Participation Action Research (FPAR) study which involved Participant Researchers (PRs) - a cohort of Ugandan women- in conducting research with successful Ugandan businesswomen to support the PRs' own aspirations of owning their own businesses, and the Principal Investigator (PI) in investigating the PRs' research processes and experiences. This project constituted the fifth stage of a longitudinal study (launched in 2004) which has investigated the challenges and opportunities for girls related to secondary school in a rural Ugandan context, as well as the ways in which education has impacted and continues to play a role in their lives as women. Findings are considered through three lenses: 1) contextualizing the relevance of the PRs' research 2) PRs' learnings from the research, both with respect to knowledge gained from SPs as well as from the research process itself; 3) PI's learnings from the PRs about FPAR. The paper also considers actions undertaken by PRs as well a further study that resulted from this project. This study demonstrated that supporting women with the tools and resources they need to conduct their own research and build their own networks can be an empowering and trans-formative process.

Keywords

feminist participatory action research, women's empowerment, Uganda, women's economic empowerment, decolonizing research, longitudinal study

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Introduction

Women's empowerment, economic autonomy, and well-being are intrinsically yet complexly interconnected (Asaleye & Strydom, 2023; Kabeer, 2020). However, women's participation in the workforce does not necessarily represent or lead to empowerment or result in economic autonomy or a satisfactory level of well-being (Jones, 2015, 2023). Rather, women in many contexts globally, such as Uganda, are disproportionately subjected to myriad oppressions of often 'survivalist' employment with "...an intensification rather than a reversal of gender disparities in income, economic opportunity, and burdens of reproductive labour" (Meagher, 2010, p. 472; see also Jones, 2015, 2023; Cornwall, 2018; Kabeer, 2020).

In general, Ugandan women's incomes are approximately 50% of that of men (Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), 2019). Ugandan women are, therefore, considerably poorer than Ugandan men (UNFPA, 2017), especially those who head, and are the sole income providers of households, which currently constitutes about 30% of all family households (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2025), and a demographic which is on the rise (World Bank, 2019). Furthermore, sociocultural norms, practices, and beliefs about women's abilities and roles severely hinder women's employment opportunities. Women assume an unequal share of domestic responsibilities (Katunze et al., 2018), are often limited (by men) in their freedom to move and associate with others (Vieitez-Cerdeno et al., 2023; Mugabi, 2014). In addition, the workplace can be an oppressive, traumatizing, and hostile and even dangerous environment where women often face physical and sexual abuse and assault, bullying, threats and intimidation, as well as gender-based employment precarity due to, for example, pregnancy, maternity leave, responsibilities of motherhood (Jones; 2023; Oosterom et al., 2023).

Self-employment therefore, is highly appealing to many Ugandan women (Jones, 2023) as it holds the possibility of earning a reasonable, even good, income if the business is successful, as well as offers flexibility of work hours, enabling them to manage their many additional responsibilities. Ugandan women have been recognized as the most entrepreneurial in the world (Mastercard, 2019; Vieitez-Cerdeño et al., 2023). Although most are 'necessity-entrepreneurs' who have been 'pushed' into self-employment (Sriram & Mersha, 2010), some have been highly successful (Paredo & McLean, 2006). Yet, little is known about how they developed their businesses. In response, this project was designed to support entrepreneurially-spirited Ugandan women interested in establishing their own businesses learn from successful Ugandan businesswomen to support their journeys, as well as to contribute to a broader understanding of the ways in which Ugandan women can engage in empowering processes that will enable them to overcome challenges, obstacles, and structural and systemic discrimination and disadvantage to assume economic leadership.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper I draw upon Naila Kabeer's (1999) conceptualization of women's empowerment, articulated as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to

make strategic life choices acquire such an ability...” (p. 435). Empowerment is not bestowed: it evolves through processes that involve participation and interactions in activities and situations that offer encouragement, opportunities, and facilitation to identify and combat oppression and constraints at both individual and collective levels (Cornwall, 2016). In contexts with a history of colonization, such as Uganda, women’s empowerment and decolonization are aligned: both seek out, identify, acknowledge, respect, and act upon the knowledge of women who have been silenced, marginalized, and/or ignored by structures of colonial (white, patriarchal, oppressive, exploitative) power in addition to those of patriarchal systems of their own cultures (Elabor-Idemudia, 2002). Women’s empowerment is an active, ongoing journey in which women, in solidarity, move to occupy spaces, claim rights, and centrally participate in socioeconomic, cultural, and political realms in which they had so often been marginalized, oppressed and/or silenced:

It is when women recognize their power within and act together with other women to exercise power with, that they gain power to act as agents; when they act in concert to tackle injustice and inequalities, this becomes ‘power for’ positive social change (Cornwall, 2016, p. 356)

In the economic realm, this involves having a choice of decent work (with, for example, good working conditions and reasonable incomes that offer more than a survivalist standard of living and), and opportunities to gain skills and knowledge to advance their careers, as well as supports and resources to protect them from exploitation, discrimination, and harassment/assault in the workplace. Furthermore, economic empowerment for women means that gains made through earning an income will tangibly and demonstrably increase their well-being and quality of life with respect to material aspects (e.g., decent shelter, sufficient food and clean water, access to necessary medical care, ability to support dependents) as well as independence.

The Study

Background to the Study

This paper reports on findings from Stage 5 (2022) of a longitudinal study (2004-) that has focused on education and its impact on a cohort of girls/women. Findings from each stage of the study have informed the focus of the subsequent stages of the study, each undertaken to learn how the participants could make gains toward expanding their capabilities and empowerment and overcome or mitigate norms, practices, and beliefs that oppress them.

Stage 1 examined challenges and opportunities related to education for 15 adolescent girls in a rural Ugandan context, and how education contributed to their emerging identities (Jones, 2008). Stage 2 (2007), grounded in the findings that these girls were very keen to learn more about HIV/AIDS because they had little access to reliable information and resources, investigated how digital literacy might facilitate

access to important health information, and found that they "...were able to imagine and appropriate identities as autonomous learners, informed global citizens...[and possibly] forged strong, meaningful connections between themselves and a desirable range of imagined communities (Norton et al., 2013, pp. 586–7). Stage 3 (2013) explored how these identities as learners, global citizens, and community members, connected to post-primary educational opportunities, had shaped their adult lives, and also reflected on the opportunities and challenges of their then positionalities. Findings from this stage revealed that although all believed that post-primary education had benefited them significantly "systemic unfreedoms impinged their agency and limited potential gains" (Jones, 2015, p. 138). Stage 4 (2018) explored the participants' interpretations of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in relationship to their lives (Jones, 2024). SDG 1: No Poverty was of the most importance to them. They all believed that having their own businesses was the best way to overcome poverty but felt they lacked knowledge about setting up and sustaining successful businesses. Stage 5 (the focus of this paper) evolved from this finding and aimed to support these entrepreneurially-inclined women (referred to here on in as Participant-Researchers (PRs)) to take action towards SDG 1 through establishing/growing their own businesses by conducting research that investigated how a sampling of prominent businesswomen (Secondary Participants (SPs)) – selected by the PRs - established and sustained businesses that thrived in a context where gender discrimination and conditions often mitigated against women's success, leadership, and empowerment.

Research Objectives and Questions

This was a two-tiered study in which the PRs conducted research of relevance to their lives, and the Principal Investigator (PI) and the Principal Investigator Research Coordinator (PIRC) investigated the PRs' research processes and experiences. The objectives of PRs' research were to: 1) engage in research activities to acquire relevant knowledge and insights that could be applied to establishing their own future businesses; and 2) through interviews, gain an understanding from successful businesswoman ((SPs) about the factors that contributed to their success and how they overcame challenges. Through the research process, the PRs developed their own research questions aligned with these objectives. The research question investigated by the PI and PIRC was: How can research training and practice support the development of skills and knowledge of women aspiring to establish their own businesses?

Methodology

This project used a longitudinal, decolonizing, Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) methodology that enabled the researcher and participants to work collaboratively in conceptualizing and actualizing the study. FPAR, like women's empowerment, is process-orientated; it seeks out and contemplates complex intersections of social, economic, cultural, political factors and influences – locally,

regionally, and globally – both to acknowledge divergent knowledges and experiences as well as to identify patterns and themes that prevail within and across diverse contexts (Struckman, 2018). FPAR also supports women in taking action and facilitating positive change in their lives (Adriany et al., 2023; Goessling, 2024; Reid et al., 2006; Reid & Frisby, 2008). Empowering processes not only foreground women’s voices, but also ensure that they contribute to emergent knowledge that informs action and foundational principles that guide policies, programming, and systemic change, as well as methodological approaches: “Building a common project...means agreeing not only on the aims of the research but also the epistemological foundations of how these aims are to be reached.” (Leinius et al., 2020, p. 79). Thus, collaboration on research questions, methods, data collection and analysis, and resultant action are collaborative (Crupi & Godden, 2024). Decolonizing research is rooted in “a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices” (Smith, 2012, p. 606), and longitudinal studies reveal layers of insights and complexities that cannot be accessed through short, bounded studies: “Given that empowerment is a process of change, the most accurate empowerment is with longitudinal data” (Heckert & Fabric, 2013, p. 322). This project was led by the participants’ realities and aspirations (as discussed above) and thus led to its inception as well as its execution. FPAR acknowledges that participants are experts of their own contexts and defers to their experiences and insights to explore and address the issue under investigation (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Elabor-Idemudia, 2002; Godden et al., 2020). The PRs’ voices and interests drove this project as it responded to the PRs’ identification as SDG 1: No Poverty as the most important, yet unrealized, SDG in their lives and their desire to learn from successful businesswomen how to establish their own successful businesses as a way of ameliorating poverty.

Participant-researcher relations are at the heart of a longitudinal, decolonizing FPAR approach as they require, foremost, a relationship of trust and reciprocity and acknowledgement of positionality, and what that means in terms of power, privilege, vulnerability, incentive (Soedirgo & Glas, 2020; Sultana, 2007). Acknowledging my positionality as a white, woman from a high income country (Canada), I understand that as a researcher, I must “continuously reflect upon, and confer about the ways in which the research is impacting, being received by, and supporting the participants, as well as ensuring collective agreement on the knowledge that is collaboratively produced” (Goessling, 2024, p. 3). I attempt to investigate and understand multiple and divergent ways in which intersections of race (whiteness), privilege, and social location position me with the potential to have more power, voice, influence, and opportunities than women whose positionalities are impacted by intersections of, for example, extreme poverty, exploitation, discrimination, and oppression. I am acutely aware of my ‘etic’ position with respect to the Ugandan women with whom I work: they live under conditions of intersectional (economic, gender-discriminatory, political, social) disadvantage and oppression that I can never know. However, I strive to communicate, as accurately as I can, what the participants have shared with me, so that it can be disseminated more broadly to bring about change. In this way, I hope to contribute to a global,

postcolonial/decolonizing, feminist project that is concerned with the promotion of global gender justice.

Researchers and Participants

Aligned with principles of FPAR, and decolonizing research, this project also adhered to The Trust Code: A Global Code of Conduct for Equitable Research Partnerships (TRUST, 2018) in all four major categories: Fairness, Respect, Care, and Honesty. Attempts were made to flatten hierarchies of power within the project, the project theme responded to participants' stated needs and desires, local researchers and participants were involved in all stages of the research process, all local researchers and research participants were fairly compensated for their contributions, and ethics approvals were obtained for at the lead researcher's institution in Canada as well as from a Ugandan university and the Uganda Council for Science and Technology. However, there did remain an inescapable hierarchical structure that related to funding, accountability, ethics clearances, project management and reporting. As such, the PI (me) and the PIRC were the project leads. The 12 participants who have been participants in various stages of this longitudinal study since 2004, were PRs *as well as* study participants. In addition, six SPs, successful Ugandan businesswomen who were recruited by the PRs, were involved in the project. All the PRs were fluent and literate in Luganda, and most have an intermediate level of English proficiency (reading, writing, speaking, comprehension). Pseudonyms are used for all research participants.

Methods

At the onset of the project, the PRs completed pre-project questionnaires. Each PR was given a laptop and during the first few sessions the PIRC and I (via videoconferencing) worked with the PRs to develop/enhance the PRs' computer literacy skills (e.g., word processing, accessing internet, joining Zoom meetings). We engaged the PRs in discussions about what they hoped to learn from successful businesswomen and collaboratively constructed interview questions that the PRs would ask the SPs. The original idea was for each PR to meet with one SP, but the PRs decided they would be more comfortable working in pairs to interview the SPs. They then recruited and interviewed (after obtaining writing, formal, consent) six SPs. The project concluded with post-project questionnaires completed by the PRs and member-checking with them once I had completed my final analysis.

Data

Data of this study consisted of: pre- and post-project questionnaires completed by PRs; notes from interviews with SPs conducted by the PRs; written responses to the questions: Why is research important? How do you define success?; videorecorded focus group discussions; and workshops with the PRs. Data was collected, categorized, coded and analyzed at each stage of the project. The PIRC is completely fluent in English and Luganda (the PRs' first language) and was always available if/when translation was required. Interviews conducted by the PRs with the SPs were conducted and transcribed in Luganda, and then translated into English by the PIRC. Table 1 below reports on the data collected and by whom.

Table 1. Data Collection

Procedure or method	Title of person(s) responsible
Pre-project questionnaires for PRs	PI and PIRC
Training workshops with PRs	PI and PIRC
Meetings and focus group discussions with PRs	PI and PIRC
Interviews with SPs	PRs
Analysis of data collected from SPs	PRs, PI, and PIRC
Analysis of data collected from PRs	PI and PIRC
Post-project questionnaires completed by PRs	PI and PIRC

Analysis. A triangulation design analysis approach (Creswell, 2008) was used by the PI and PIRC to analyze the PRs' responses to questionnaires, meeting notes, written responses to prompt questions, and focus group discussions. A grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008) was used to analyze data collected from the SPs by the PRs. Collaboratively, the PRs, PI, and PIRC inventoried the data and identified key themes related to the research questions asked of the SPs. Data was coded and categorized into major and sub-themes.

Exceptional Circumstances

This was a difficult time to conduct research, as it was undertaken during the lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. At times, no travel or gatherings were permitted and so the project stalled. At other times, limited travel was permitted, and the PRs found ways to come together in two different locales (closest to where each was situated) and connect via Zoom. Other times, travel permitted the whole group to come together, but there were curfews and associated pressures for those who travelled long distances. There were also the regular challenges of travel during the rainy season when roads can become almost impassable as well as poor internet connectivity (especially during the rainy season). Another complicating factor was time difference, which made it difficult for me to attend entire meetings. However, despite this plethora of obstacles, almost all the PRs almost all of the time, showed up, demonstrating a high level of commitment to the project.

Findings

Findings are considered through three lenses: 1) contextualizing the research relevance by considering PRs' thoughts about, and experiences with their own businesses; 2) PRs' findings; PI's findings.

Contextualizing the relevance of the PRs' research

Table 2 below depicts the PRs' business experience and challenges which catalyzed their interest in learning from successful businesswomen.

Table 2. PRs' Business Experience

Category	Details
Total PRs with past business experience	7 out of 8
Types of past businesses	Used clothes (1) Firewood (1) Retail shop (4) Food/catering (2) Food wholesaling (1) Stationery supplies (2)
PRs currently operating businesses	Total: 4 Retail shop (1) Catering (1) Food wholesaling (1) Firewood (1)
Enjoyment of business ownership	Responses: 8 Yes (7) Sometimes (1)
Profitability of businesses	Responses: 7 No profit (5) Little profit (2)
Ability to cover basic living costs from businesses	Responses: 7 No (3) Sometimes/not very often (3) Most of the time (1)
Challenges	Lack of capital (8) Lack of knowledge/experience (8) High rent (2) Transport costs (2) Lack of good inventory and necessary supplies (2) Poor location (1) Cost of buying lunch (1) Unreliable customers (3) Damage during transport (1) Machine breakdown (1)

PRs' Findings

Learnings from the SPs with Respect to Establishing and Sustaining Successful Businesses. The PRs, PIRC and I had been involved in research together for more than 20 years and over that time, the PRs had become very familiar with what was involved in 'research', at least from the perspective of a participant. This knowledge and experience proved to be beneficial to them when it came to developing research questions and conducting research with the SPs. Their main research question, collectively formulated, was: "What can we learn from successful businesswomen about establishing and sustaining a successful business?". The PRs then collaboratively developed the interview protocol which had 17 questions. Thus the FPAR approach served to be a "...multidimensional process of increasing the capacity/capabilities (i.e., resources and agency) of individuals or groups to make choices..." (Shauranga et al., 2018, p. 18).

Table 3. Knowledge Gained About Establishing/sustaining Business

Theme	No of PRs
Excellent customer care and good relationships with others	8
Networking	7
Researching and planning a business	6
Courage, determination, and perseverance through difficult times	6
Finding ways to solve problems	5
Savings groups/culture	5
Good bookkeeping	5
Diversification/having more than one business	3
Passion for business	2

During online data analysis sessions, the PRs, the PIRC, and co-created 11 thematic categories from the responses to the 17 questions. The PRs then identified several key themes within these categories related to how the SPs established and sustained successful businesses, including: good customer service, networking and collaboration, a ‘saving [money] culture’, seeking advice, building trust, taking risks, identifying needs in the community, self-confidence and self-assertion, and demonstrating fortitude and resilience in the face of difficulties. They also learned about common challenges experienced by the SPs, including: lack of start-up capital; erratic cash flow; bullying and sexual aggression by men; a lack of inexperience running a business and necessary skills (e.g., accounting, inventory); problems with inventory (e.g., expiration of perishable products); lack of customers; customers defaulting on payments. Answers to questions on the post-project questionnaires echoed these themes.

Table 3 below presents answers from the post-project questionnaire to the PRs with respect to what they had learned about successfully establishing and sustaining a business.

When asked “Did this project support the development of your ideas for your own business?”, all responded “yes”.

PRs’ Learnings from the Research Process Itself. The PRs communicated that they had gained wide-ranging, valuable, and practical skills from the project, including: computer skills; bookkeeping; videoconferencing; word processing; using the internet; and typing. Representative was Tracy’s response: “I improved on my computers skills now I am able to type a document very quickly and to easily access the emails... And it will help me much.” Another PR mentioned how she learned that videoconferencing had the potential to build networks: “It enables me to know how to use zoom and Skype meeting with different people worldwide.” When asked “Do you think that your participation in this project was beneficial to you with respect to gaining research skills?”, all responded “yes”. Elaborations included “Yes. I came to know where business ladies sell their products... This will help me improve on the marketing structure of the business I want to start because I developed out a dream of keeping poultry I already made the budget I feel very grateful for this research”; “Yes; It enables me to know how to use zoom and Skype meeting with different people worldwide.” When asked “What was the most enjoyable aspect of participating in this research?” answers were: interviewing the SPs (6); learning new things (e.g., computer skills, business knowledge) (8).

Responses to the question “What, if any, were the most valuable aspects for you personally related to your participation in this project? (e.g., increased knowledge, relationships with others, expanded networks, skills gained)” were: computer skills (5); relationships with others/expanded networks (6); increased knowledge (2). The PRs were also asked “What was the least enjoyable aspect of participating in this research?” and they discussed travel to research meetings, especially with COVID curfews (3), poor internet (4), inadequate advance notice of research meetings (1), “people who refused to be asked questions about their business” (1), the length of time it took to complete the research (1).

The FPAR approach enabled the PRs to sustain, build and/or expand networks and friendships, which [Kabeer \(1994\)](#) considers a critical aspect of empowerment: “New forms of consciousness arise out of women’s newly acquired access to the intangible resources of analytical skills, social networks, organizational strength, solidarity and sense of not being alone” (p. 246), which is consistent with findings from other studies that have also found community-building/engagement and networking to be highly valued by other women entrepreneurs in Uganda ([Vieitez-Cerdeño et al., 2023](#)). Five of the PRs expressed that their favourite part of this study was conducting interviews with the SPs and realizing that they had the personal capacity to engage in research and be welcomed and respected, as well as supported in growing their businesses by the SPs. When asked if the research helped them to build networks of value, all responded in the affirmative with representative comments such as “Yes; lady we interviewed has different networks where she can connect me”; “Yes; the women interviewed has big networks I can connect with her”; “Yes; the lady we interviewed is now a good friend and ...we are free to ask her any other questions”; “Yes, The lady we interviewed has a big connection with successful people and she told us to feel free and consult her whenever we want so I believe she can connect us to other networks coz she was so kind to us”; “Yes; The lady we interviewed can connect to other people/network.” The PRs also discussed the value of reconnecting with each other. One PR wrote that she enjoyed “meeting my old girls and learning things from them”, and another wrote “This project let me to meet all my old girls and we have been so friendly” and “It has brought me back to my old friends and have got to know how they have been standing up to now.” The PRs felt inspired and supported by these connections with other women, a key element of empowerment ([Cornwall, 2016](#)). FPAR also contributed to the lifelong learning of the PRs, an essential aspect of empowerment ([Eldred et al., 2014](#); [Robinson-Pant, 2014](#); [Wetheridge, 2016](#)).

Action Based on this Study

Tracy, with her research partner, Gloria, interviewed Harriet, a successful businesswoman who kept livestock (chickens, cows, and goats), grew a variety of crops, had rental houses, and made and sold bricks. With advice and support from Harriet, Tracy established a poultry farm. Tracy reflected that she had become a more ‘empowered woman’ who was now able to fully support her daughter with secondary school fees and save towards her university studies. Tracy herself had been unable to afford to attend university, although she had been the top student at her secondary school and had had aspirations to be a doctor and so she was thrilled that, through the knowledge, skills, and confidence and hope she had gained through the project, in combination with her own industriousness and determination she could map out a

path in her life that enabled her to become the mother she wanted to be for her daughter and support her daughter achieve her goals for the future which constitutes transformative change with respect to opportunities for girls and women.

Ireen and her research partner, Gelly, interviewed Rita, who had a poultry farm, owned a school, and had rental houses. Ireen, who has a banana wholesale business, reported that after the project she interacted with Rita regularly, on a casual basis, but then had consulted her recently when another individual with whom Ireen had business dealings stole a significant amount of money from her. Ireen drew upon the personal strength and assertiveness she had gained through the project, as well as the support from her fellow PRs/ friends and Rita, and borrowed money from the women's savings group and, despite enormous trepidation, immersed herself in the enormously cumbersome, complicated, and 'corrupt' (as she said), judicial system to launch a lawsuit. This was as an immensely intimidating prospect for Ireen who had not completed secondary schooling, but she felt empowered to take it on. She won the case.

Yudaya and her research partner, Jenenie, interviewed Maria, who had a successful poultry business. Yudaya, who had a small retail shop in the trading center, and wanted to expand this to include a tailoring business said: "I went back to her. I wanted to get more ideas from her..." Yudaya spent time researching small businesses and ultimately decided to make a major move to Kampala (the capital city) to establish a tailoring business. This was a huge decision and not the kind of choice that many women from the village would or could have made. But Yudaya felt confident in relocating to Kampala both at a personal level, and as well as at professional level.

These examples speak to empowerment as action in which "participants in social change...shape the social world of their aspirations" (Bradbury et al., p. 9). However, empowerment is not only about 'doing'; it is also, importantly, about building one's capacity to perceive one's potential, agency, and opportunities as increased and improved:

[Empowerment] does more than 'unlock women's potential' but incites them to think differently...this process may take diverse pathways. This calls for us to see empowerment less as a destination than as a journey (Cornwall, 2016, p. 25)

It was clear that the research had impacted the PRs' thinking, as they commented that the research process had "helped to answer questions...and understand various issues", "helped in sharing valuable ideas", "has given us hope", "has made us innovative", "helps us to know the truth and prove lies", "helps you understand different issues and increases public awareness because you can be sure with what you're talking about", "helped us to understand women's issues", "made us strong to say what we think". They also made some general comments about their feelings of increased empowerment: "whatever happens...you might not solve [the problem] there and then but [I know] there is a way I can handle it and get through it", and "before I used to keep quiet but now if it [requires me] to make noise, I do", "We have changed the culture at work. That sometime back we would even not speak, but now we speak out [about issues that are problematic]", and "we have learned that women don't have rights and we are going to fight that".

Emergence of Subsequent Study

A subsequent project (Stage 6) was based on findings from Stage 5 which began and ended with a weekend workshop (focused on defining and exploring the meaning of ‘empowerment’ for the PRs, in their contexts), had monthly sessions in which guest speakers/advisors of the women’s choosing were invited – was focused on the co-development (the PRs and myself) of a Resiliency and Empowerment Framework (REF) and Resiliency and Empowerment Plan (REP). During this project the PRs launched a savings group, which monthly meetings, monthly accounting of funds, and a record of all projects it has supported (e.g., constructing rental units, expanding inventory in shops, supporting poultry and pig farming, purchasing coffee plants). The savings group is a formally registered entity, recognized by the government. Gloria summed up her learning from both Stages 5 and 6 (words of the PRIC, who translated): “The research helped a lot, at first she went and visited role model [successful businesswoman] who helped her to tell her what she was doing and how she does it...and later on, shaping her goal, she now she can see her potential and she feels much more confident right now that she can achieve her goal because she has all what it takes and she knows how to get there.” This reflects one of the criterion of effective action research which is “...to leave some lasting impact amongst those involved” (Bradbury & Reason, 2003, p. 171)

PI’s Findings

Returning to the central question this research aimed to address, we now discuss if and how the process described supported a decolonized approach to FPAR.

PRs’ Feedback about the Research Process. At the heart of this study was interest in gaining understanding of the PRs’ feelings about the research process itself. The post-project questionnaire asked: “Did you experience any challenges from your participation in this research?” and then whether they were able to overcome those challenges and, if so, how. Traveling to meetings was considered to be a challenge, especially for the four PRs living at a far distance (two to 3 hours away) from the locale of the central site (close to most of the PRs and equidistant for those who had to travel by intercity coach), and this issue was not one that was overcome. Transport money was provided but the time and inconvenience associated with the travel remained. Additionally, the transportation was particularly unreliable and erratic during the pandemic. Thus, PRs living closer to the core research site were required to wait for those who traveled long distances. Time management was a related issue: “Sometimes we could reach at the venue when other friends are not there and we wait for them for almost an hour or even more than that yet kafew [COVID curfew] is waiting.” We attempted to organize meetings online for those who were at distance, but connectivity and even local travel to access internet was highly problematic. Tracy expanded on pandemic-related challenges: “COVID 19 was a big challenge. It restricted us from finishing up this research in time. Transport means were not good since bodaboda [motorcycle] guys were not allowed to take passengers.” Communication was also considered by some to be problematic: “...sometimes meetings were confirmed late like 1 or 2 days before but instead, at least we get informed one week before

so we can plan for ourselves and get ready for it. And also, there are some people who are not on whatsapp and not checking their emails often so for those one I have to ensure that I call them.”

As the PI, learning about these challenges was extremely insightful. I was not fully aware of the hardships and inconveniences that the travel to meetings caused for some, especially during the time of COVID conditions and curfews, and once I learned about this I was even more deeply grateful for the PRs’ involvement in the project. I regretted that organization and time management with respect to the meetings was at times lacking on the part of myself and the PIRC, causing the PRs inconvenience and frustration. I appreciated immensely the PRs’ honesty in their feedback as it enabled me to much more fully grasp their realities, contributions, and perspectives of the research process. I was very humbled to learn of these challenges, but I believe that this is a critical component to FPAR – opening dialogue to foster partnership. This learning will inform my future research.

Reflections on Empowerment. From my positionality as a researcher, the FPAR methodological approach offered opportunities to support women’s empowerment with respect to “... their capacity to exercise strategic control over their own lives” (Kabeer, 2008, p. 27) through decolonizing research processes that foregrounded their interests, aspirations, and responded to their lived experiences and personal aspirations. I believe that the PIRC and my presence was required to facilitate the overall project and mentor in particular areas, but the PRs were highly capable of developing their own research questions, recruiting participants, leading, owning, and adapting the research process to suit their needs and desires. For example, the initial research plan involved each of the PRs individually interviewing a SP. However, the PRs expressed that they felt somewhat intimidated at the prospect of interviewing an SP on their own and so they decided to interview the SPs in pairs. This worked well for both their level of comfort as well as process: one PR asked the questions and the other took notes during the interviews. Participation by the PRs in the data analysis demonstrated their acuity at identifying key themes with supporting evidence. They also articulated many ways in which they could apply findings from their research with the SPs to strengthen their business skills, knowledge, and networking.

Reflections on Opportunities to Strengthen the FPAR Process. Overall, increased involvement with the PRs from the outset of the project (from the proposal stage) would have been beneficial. The project did build upon a prior stage of the longitudinal study in which participants expressed their needs and interests, and their input was foundational to the research focus and questions. However, additional input from the PRs conceptually and logistically would have strengthened the project, even though there would remain a differential in terms of project management structure (for reasons of, for example, funding, accountability, research expertise/knowledge, time commitment, oversight). The design and execution of this project, particularly with respect to methods, such as formal interviews, could be considered a very Western/Global North approach and it would interesting and instructive to collaboratively explore with the PRs other kinds of methods for conducting research/knowledge gathering/acquisition.

Cultivating Feminist Global Community through the Personal

Bradbury et al. (2019) argue that “...exaggerated concern with avoiding solipsism has disappeared our ability to engage also in a delicate empiricism that can enrich our understanding of the universal through the personal, and thus empower our ability to move to intelligent action together” (p. 6). FPAR offers an antidote to “avoiding solipsism” by requiring researchers and participants to get to know each other on a personal level, in order to authentically investigate intersections of shared experiences as well as learn about and appreciate divergent, unique experiences. I have been “working” with these PRs for over 20 years now and have seen them complete various levels of education, get jobs, marry, have children, suffer deep loss, and and experience other major life events. They, in turn, have watched my life shift from that of a PhD student conducting research with them to a professor at a Canadian university and have seen my child grow from a one and half year old to a university student. It is only through opening ourselves to others – as researcher and participant – that we permit access to our inner worlds, where we can find precious filaments of connection and universal understanding. The participants and I know that we will never fully ‘know’ the very different contexts in which we have and continue to live, but we have also learned how to share our different knowledge in ways that can bring about change. PAR/FPAR approaches, particularly with longitudinal trajectories, offer rich opportunities for collaboration that have the potential to identify, call out, challenge and change oppressive structures and systems that stifle freedom and empowerment.

Conclusion

Using a decolonizing, FPAR methodology this project: i) contributed insights into the journeys and experiences of the SPs in the establishment and sustainment of their businesses; ii) provided opportunities for PRs to develop research skills and competencies to enable them to increase their knowledge and understanding of how successful women-owned businesses have been established and sustained; and iii) explored the potential of a feminist, decolonizing, allyship model of participatory research where the PI takes a mentorship role that supports women to gain knowledge they deem important by undertaking their own research in their own context. Neither empowerment nor transformational societal change happen instantaneously. They take time and manifest differently for different people and contexts. Empowerment may not immediately manifest as a visible ‘doing’ or ‘transformation’; it may – as Cornwall (2016) suggests - be a paradigmatical shift in thinking that eventually leads to different choices, decisions, and actions that disrupt the status quo and improve the quality of women’s lives. This project demonstrated the immense potential for transformative change that can arise from women identifying their needs, setting the research agenda, and simply having the opportunity to talk with and learn from each other. It also revealed the latent capabilities of marginalized women to conduct their own research into what they deem necessary to improve their lives and well-being and support their empowerment. Furthermore, this study speaks to how the power of connection between women – friendships, mentorships, and networks - can cultivate the support, confidence-building, sharing of experiences and knowledge, and collective agency can bring about transformative change.

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Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Royal Roads University REB (October 27, 2020), the Mbarara University REB (Ethical Clearance Reference Number: MUREC 1/7, December 8, 2020), and the Uganda National Councils for Science and Technology (Ethical Clearance Reference Number: SS710ES on June 21, 2021).

Consent for Participate

All participants provided written informed consent prior to participating.

Consent for Publication

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Global Research Ethics and Inclusion

I have indicated in the 'Researchers and participants' section of my paper how my research adheres to the TRUST Code.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available in the Open Science Foundation repository DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/VKBDY. I have included reference to the available dataset in the Methods section of the paper.

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Author Biography

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