


# Empowering Organized Grassroots Women as a Social Change Agent for Sustainability in Kenya

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## Abstract

This study investigates the transformative role of grassroots women in Kitui County, Kenya, who, through NGO-led training and self-organization, actively address socio-economic and political challenges within their communities. Employing a qualitative research approach including interviews, focus group discussions, and observations the study highlights how these women drive social change by mitigating poverty, combating gender-based violence, and dismantling barriers to education and leadership. Despite their resilience, they face persistent challenges, including limited human capital, weak networking structures, and restricted access to financial resources. The findings underscore the urgent need for enhanced governmental and stakeholder support to strengthen women's leadership and economic empowerment. This study advocates for targeted investments in resources, training, and capacity-building initiatives to foster long-term resilience and sustainable community transformation.

## Keywords

Grassroots Women, Leadership, Resilience, Gender Equality, Economic Empowerment, Community Development, Social Transformation, Policy Advocacy

## 1. Introduction

Women in marginalized communities across Kenya bear the brunt of climate change and socio-economic inequalities, with 80% of displaced populations globally being women and children (UNDP, 2023), leaving them disproportionately vulnerable to poverty, food insecurity, and loss of livelihoods. As noted by UN Women (2023), women and girls frequently lose livelihoods but remain responsible for unpaid domestic and caregiving roles. This study investigates the role of

grassroots women in fostering community resilience, examining how organized groups influence social, economic, and political dynamics to create lasting change. When effectively implemented, sustainable development processes can empower grassroots women to improve the living conditions of their families and communities, helping them to overcome these vulnerabilities (Byanyima & Schilen, 2014). This study seeks to address the critical challenge of transitioning to development models that foster environmental sustainability and resilience while eliminating the exploitation of grassroots women and girls in Kenya.

Grassroots women living in marginalized, disaster-prone communities face compounding vulnerabilities due to poverty, inequality, and without voice and power (Kaplan, 2016). However, they have also demonstrated remarkable resilience and leadership in mobilizing to reduce disaster risks and build stronger, more resilient communities (Fordham et al., 2015). The human and economic impacts of disasters and climate change continue to accelerate globally. Disaster deaths rose by 62% and affected populations grew by 26% (CERD, 2008). Developing countries bear the heaviest losses, estimated at over \$520 billion from 1998 to 2017 (Fordham et al., 2015). Within these countries, marginalized groups like informal settlement residents and grassroots women are most at risk. Preventable deaths of women and girls in disasters often exceed those of men, entrenched gender discrimination intersects with poverty, exclusion, and lack of social support to construct deeper vulnerabilities (UNDP, 2023).

However, grassroots women's groups have shown that when organized and empowered. They are powerful agents in building community resilience, through sustained, community-driven efforts to claim rights, resources, and decision-making power, which have pioneered approaches to reduce risks (Fordham et al., 2015). One of the ways has been by strengthening social cohesion and support systems to protect the most vulnerable and securing land rights and disaster-resilient housing (Usamah et al., 2014). They also reduce risks by establishing community savings and credit to finance disaster preparedness and recovery, monitoring government services and budget allocations, and managing vital information flows before, during, and after disasters (Usamah et al., 2014). Other ways include pioneering sustainable environmental practices that reduce underlying risk factors and increasing access to healthcare, markets, and income diversity. These efforts simultaneously advance women's strategic interests while making entire communities more resilient against stresses, shocks, and disasters. Multi-purpose community centres for women and children have proven especially impactful as convergence spaces for organizing, sharing knowledge, delivering services, and influencing authorities (Fordham et al., 2015).

Grassroots women often focus on building resilience within communities, creating lasting positive effects (Papa & Singhal, 2009). UNDP affirms grassroots women's definition of resilient practices, certain case examples illustrated in this study do not explicitly address disasters but focus on development priorities identified by the communities as keys to reducing their vulnerabilities and securing

their asset base to cushion from low income (e.g. small-scale farming and small businesses) or extreme no income activities (e.g. housewives).

Early Grassroots Women Movements Suffrage movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as the women's suffrage movement led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the United States (Flexner, 1959). These movements laid the foundation for women's active participation in social and political change. Second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 70s emphasized reproductive rights, gender equality, and workplace discrimination (Tong, 2009). The Women's March movement began in 2017, mobilizing millions of women globally to advocate for gender equality and social justice (WomensMarch.com). Grassroots women played a significant role in these movements, organizing rallies, advocating for policy changes, and raising awareness.

However, women's vital contributions often go unrecognized and under-resourced. Mainstreaming gender in disaster risk reduction remains a key imperative. Direct funding, targeted capacity building, inclusion in decision-making, and peer learning exchanges can further unlock and accelerate women-led resilience building. There is an urgent need to better understand, resource, and integrate grassroots women's strategies for enhancing pro-poor, equitable resilience against rising disaster and climate threats. The provided case document offers critical insights into how this can be achieved.

This article provides an overview of the progress made by women and the challenges ahead concerning promoting gender equality in leadership and governance and women empowerment as part of the new reform of effectiveness in creating robust community changes and development. It does so based on a review of the training they have received from one of the NGOs in Kenya known as Women Economic Empowerment (WEL) and an analysis of data available on [Kenyatta University Women Economic Empowerment HUB \(2022\)](#) focused on women on governance and through research conducted in 5 counties namely Kitui, Bomet, Nakuru, Kirinyaga and Mombasa. This article further delves into the dynamics of creating resilient social change through organized grassroots women in Kenya, exploring the strategies they employ, and the impact they have on their communities.

The promotion of diversity and education has the potential to cultivate innovative ideas, leading to increased productivity (Loko & Diouf, 2009). The correlation between higher economic participation by women and increased expenditure on children's education holds significant implications for long-term growth. Gender inequality, associated with income inequality, can compromise the sustainability of growth (Gonzales et al., 2015). This connection operates through various channels: direct contributions of gender wage gaps to income inequality, disparities in labor force participation rates between men and women leading to earnings inequality, and lower gender inequality correlating with improved health outcomes for women and children (World Bank, 2011). The intertwined nature of economic development and female empowerment suggests that progress in one area has the

potential to alleviate gender inequality, which is inherently valuable. Moreover, female empowerment offers instrumental value in contributing to overall development. Recognizing these factors is crucial for the effective implementation of gender-responsive projects (Nelson & Huyer, 2016). The study intends to answer the question; to what extent does women's empowerment create resilience in women at the grassroots?

### **Statement of the Problem**

During periods of severe climate change that hinder socio-economic growth, grassroots women disproportionately bear the burden due to pre-existing gender inequalities and socio-economic vulnerabilities. They face restricted access to critical resources, training, and networking opportunities, limiting their capacity for economic and social mobility. This study focuses on grassroots women in Kitui County who, with the support of NGOs, have organized themselves to address pressing social, economic, and leadership challenges within their communities. While these women demonstrate significant potential in driving social change tackling issues such as poverty, gender-based violence, and limited educational opportunities their efforts are often hindered by systemic barriers. These include inadequate human capital, constrained access to credit and savings, and insufficient collaboration with key stakeholders, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to support their empowerment. Understanding how these women contribute to community resilience is vital for developing targeted interventions that empower them. This research aims to fill a gap in knowledge regarding how grassroots women navigate the challenges posed by climate change while striving for social equity and sustainable development.

### **Objective**

This study aims to explore and evaluate the adaptive strategies employed by grassroots women in strengthening community resilience amidst climate change challenges.

## **2. Literature Review and Theory**

### **2.1. The Role of Grassroots Women in Social Change**

Grassroots women have historically played pivotal roles in social change movements, from early suffrage campaigns to contemporary initiatives like the Women's March. Studies emphasize that women's empowerment is directly linked to economic growth, improved child education, and better community health outcomes. However, grassroots women continue to face challenges such as limited education, financial exclusion, and social marginalization, which impede their full potential.

Research suggests that grassroots women operate with long-term agendas, even if their entry points are short-term projects. According to Helle et al. (2016), while many rural women across diverse countries have access to land, they are much less likely than men to inherit or acquire land in their names. Traditional development initiatives often focus on empowering poor women through material and

financial support, but these efforts need to be strengthened to ensure long-term sustainability.

In Kenya, grassroots women have emerged as powerful agents of social change, demonstrating resilience in the face of challenges and contributing significantly to community advancement. These women advocate for gender equality, education, healthcare, and economic empowerment despite historical marginalization. They often serve as first responders to crises and play a crucial role in building community resilience.

#### **Limitations**

The NGO faced the limitation of funds in accessing all the respondents during the implementation of these programs, this limitation affects the study's outcomes as the respondents needed to be given some allowances.

## **2.2. Challenges Faced by Grassroots Women**

### **Limited Human Capital**

Studies indicate that women generally have lower financial literacy levels than men, which hinders their ability to engage in economic activities. NGOs have implemented financial literacy training programs to bridge this gap, but these efforts have not always resulted in sustainable empowerment. Without adequate human capital, networks, and government contracts, sustaining economic growth and employment generation remains a challenge for most women in Kenya.

### **Networking and Collaboration**

Networking is essential for women's empowerment, yet grassroots women often lack opportunities to build social and professional networks. Direct collaboration with NGOs and other stakeholders can enhance their access to credit and savings while fostering economic empowerment and community development. Studies highlight the importance of grassroots women's organizations in savings and credit groups, community banks, and agricultural cooperatives.

Grassroots women's groups, such as *chamas*, initially focus on economic improvement but often expand their influence to lobbying for basic services, infrastructure, and political participation. Strengthening these networks is key to enhancing their resilience and long-term impact.

### **Access to Credit and Savings**

Many rural women lack legal ownership of assets, which limits their access to financial services. Gender-based discrimination further restricts their ability to obtain credit and savings. Although various strategies have been implemented—such as creating income-generating opportunities, addressing legal and political barriers, and reducing women's domestic burdens—these efforts have not significantly improved financial inclusion for grassroots women.

## **3. Social Role Theory**

This study is informed by Social Role Theory, which suggests that gender roles arise primarily from societal stereotypes and labor distribution. Women are often

relegated to caregiving and domestic responsibilities, while men dominate leadership and economic activities. This division of labor influences access to resources and opportunities, reinforcing gender disparities. By applying this theory, the study examines how societal norms shape the experiences and contributions of grassroots women in Kenya.

#### 4. Methodology

The study surveyed 69 trained women out of a total of 520 from 13 groups. Using census sampling, all 13 groups were selected. Three leaders (chairperson, secretary, and treasurer) were selected purposively from each group, while three other members were chosen randomly. The study achieved an 88% response rate.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations. A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore participants' experiences. Women in Kitui had been trained by Women Empowerment Link (WEL), an NGO, in financial literacy and gender-based violence prevention. They formed self-help groups to combat poverty and support community development.

The research included a literature review focusing on grassroots women's vulnerabilities, resilience-building strategies, and barriers to leadership. Expert interviews with grassroots women leaders provided insights into prevailing challenges and strategies for resilience building.

Observations were conducted at a tree nursery managed by group members, confirming that the project served as an income-generating activity. The researcher documented findings through field notes and photographs as shown in **Figure 1**. This study's findings contribute to ongoing research on women in governance and economic empowerment, providing evidence-based recommendations for enhancing grassroots women's resilience and leadership.



Tree nursery for one of the women groups in Kitui -Kenya. (2022)

**Figure 1.** Tree planting nursery.

#### 5. Results

##### Response Rate

The study successfully surveyed 69 out of 520 trained women from 13 groups across four locations in Kitui County. Census sampling was employed, ensuring

that all 13 groups were included in the study. Within each group, three leaders (chairperson, secretary, and treasurer) were purposively selected, while three other members were randomly chosen using simple random sampling. **Table 1** presents the response rate by location:

**Table 1.** Response rate.

<i>Location</i>	<i>Groups</i>	<i>Frequency (N)</i>	<i>Frequency (%)</i>
<i>Ethiani</i>	3	15	21.74
<i>Mukameni</i>	3	13	18.84
<i>Tiva</i>	6	36	52.17
<i>Township</i>	1	5	7.25
<b><i>Total</i></b>	13	69	100

In 2014, a group of 10 women established a network supported by Women Empowerment Link (WEL), which continues to thrive as part of the 2021-2022 cohort. This grassroots network of women has focused on improving their capacity to produce and sell high-quality trees in local and national markets. As **Buechler (2012)** notes, grassroots women organize at the local level, leveraging community resources and networks to create meaningful and sustainable change. Despite significant progress, the challenge remains to shift to development models that foster environmental sustainability and resilience, while eliminating the exploitation of women and girls.

The women's groups, having completed WEL's training in 2014, have grown in number and now encompass various business and farming initiatives, alongside grassroots grantees. Their acquired skills have enabled them to streamline administrative processes for rural community projects, offering strategic support to local women's organizations in Kenya. **Kelly & Duerst-Lahti (1995)** highlight the importance of empowering women to take leadership roles, similar to the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, where leadership roles enable women in the informal sector to shape their own economic and social well-being. By championing grassroots leadership, organizations like SEWA directly address the challenges faced by individuals in specific communities, promoting sustainable and effective solutions.

A key success driver for one group of women was their trust in the leadership and knowledge of local women. They united to improve marginalized communities by developing project-based programs. Their confidence in grassroots women to propose viable solutions to inequality and poverty underscores the power of local knowledge and leadership. One participant shared: "*We thank WEL for the training that opened our eyes; women now understand their rights and have committed to working as a team to support each other.*" A WEL official added: "*The training is designed to promote their economic empowerment and ensure their families live in unity.*"

Women and girls are not inherently vulnerable; rather, their social, economic, and political conditions exacerbate their susceptibility to risks. In the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the African Agenda 2063, unsustainable development, characterized by unregulated, market-driven economic growth, compounds the social, economic, and environmental challenges they face. This destruction often strips women and girls of their livelihoods, yet they are still expected to perform domestic chores and care for extended families. Addressing the gaps in development support is critical for reversing this cycle. When grassroots women-led projects are implemented, they significantly transform the living conditions of their families and communities, reducing vulnerabilities (Byanyima & Schilen, 2014). Linking gender equality to sustainable development is both an ethical and moral imperative (Phumzile, 2014).

WEL's overarching goal is to strengthen a national movement of grassroots women advocating for women's rights and gender equality. By training local women's groups, fostering alliances, and raising awareness among donors and key stakeholders, WEL aims to improve the quality of life for marginalized communities throughout Kenya.

#### **Inclusivity and Diversity**

Case studies on "Women in Governance 2022" highlighted how networks of rural grassroots women utilize financial literacy and transformational leadership training to establish sustainable practices. These efforts are crucial for reversing the adverse social, economic, and political conditions faced by women and communities. Grassroots women's holistic, integrated, and inclusive approaches align with national development goals. Recognition and support for climate change adaptation initiatives and bottom-up development interventions led by rural grassroots women are foundational to achieving sustainable development (Fordham et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the case of the Black Lives Matter movement illustrates the power of inclusivity and diversity. Founded by three women in 2013, the movement addresses systemic racism and violence against Black communities, ensuring a wide range of voices are heard and valued (Hooks et al., 1984). Such diversity in leadership is integral for achieving a just and equitable society.

#### **Peer Learning and Community Empowerment**

Many grassroots women in this study emphasized the importance of peer learning facilitated by NGOs. They expressed the need for government and donor support to implement their initiatives. These women aspire to increase their representation in leadership roles and hold governments accountable for their commitments. They advocate for the recognition of grassroots women's organizations, urging governments to allocate funds for small businesses, cooperatives, and market access to further empower women.

Approximately 80% of the women in the study were engaged in farming or business ownership (Table 2), reflecting the economic empowerment achieved through WEL's training. The remaining participants were predominantly em-

ployed or domestic workers, demonstrating the diverse roles women occupy in their communities.

**Table 2.** Occupation.

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Employed</i>	7	10.14
<i>Farmer</i>	28	40.58
<i>Business Owner</i>	26	37.68
<i>Domestic Worker</i>	5	7.25
<b><i>Total</i></b>	69	100

### **Empowerment through Education**

Organized grassroots women in Kitui, with support from WEL, have emphasized the critical role of education in fostering resilience. Through workshops, seminars, and campaigns, these women work to challenge traditional gender norms and ensure that girls receive equal educational opportunities. Their community education initiatives are vital for raising awareness and empowering individuals to engage in transformative social change (Freire, 1970).

### **Advocacy and Lobbying**

Grassroots women in Kenya engage in health advocacy, focusing on maternal health, healthcare access, and disease prevention. Through these efforts, they aim to create healthier, more resilient communities. Advocacy and lobbying are potent strategies for social change, enabling women to influence policies that directly impact their lives. These women also participate in local governance and national politics, advocating for gender-inclusive policies that address violence and discrimination.

### **Direct Action**

Direct action, characterized by non-violent but assertive methods such as peaceful protests and civil disobedience, remains a powerful tool for grassroots women to challenge the status quo and effect social change (Sharp & Hazirjian, 1973). By combining advocacy, lobbying, and direct action, these women create resilient social change that addresses both immediate and long-term community needs.

### **Economic Empowerment Initiatives**

Research by Kenyatta University's WEE Hub emphasizes economic empowerment as a cornerstone of resilience for organized grassroots women in Kenya. By engaging in small-scale agriculture, handicrafts, and entrepreneurial ventures, these women improve their financial standing and contribute to their communities' economic development. Grassroots fundraising plays a critical role in sustaining these initiatives, demonstrating the power of community-based financial mobilization (Salamon & Anheier, 1997). Women in Kitui County, inspired by groups such as the "Mothers' Love Group," have significantly contributed to local

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development efforts, such as tree planting, which continues to promote sustainable community practices.

### **Overcoming Challenges**

Organized grassroots women face numerous challenges in their efforts to foster resilient social change. These challenges, ranging from resource limitations to entrenched power structures, demand creative solutions, persistence, and unwavering dedication to the cause. Below are key obstacles faced and strategies for overcoming them.

### **Funding and Resources**

Grassroots movements are often constrained by limited financial resources, hindering the ability to implement and sustain initiatives. To overcome these challenges, grassroots women can employ creative fundraising strategies, such as crowdfunding, community events, and forging partnerships with local businesses. Tapping into volunteer networks can also help expand capacity without relying solely on financial resources. Through collective efforts and resource mobilization, women can continue their work despite limited funds.

### **Limited Access to Information and Technology**

In some communities, barriers to accessing information or technology impede effective communication and organization. Grassroots women can overcome this by utilizing alternative communication methods such as community meetings, phone calls, and printed materials. Additionally, partnering with organizations focused on digital inclusion can help bridge the technology gap, enabling women to better mobilize and organize.

### **Resistance from Power Structures**

Grassroots women often face resistance from established power structures, including government entities, corporations, and societal norms that maintain the status quo. Advocacy and lobbying are powerful tools to engage decision-makers and advocate for policy changes. Building coalitions with like-minded organizations can amplify voices and put pressure on those in power to address the issues at hand.

### **Societal Norms and Discrimination**

Deep-seated societal norms and biases often present significant barriers, particularly when addressing gender, race, and other marginalized identities. Grassroots women can challenge these obstacles by engaging in community education and awareness campaigns to shift stereotypes and biases. Creating safe spaces for dialogue and promoting inclusivity in training initiatives can foster understanding and change within communities.

### **Representation and Inclusivity**

Ensuring that all voices within a community are represented is a fundamental challenge for grassroots movements. To address this, grassroots women should actively seek diverse perspectives and create platforms for underrepresented individuals to contribute to decision-making processes. By implementing inclusive practices, they can ensure that all members of the community have a voice in the movement.

### **Legal and Regulatory Hurdles**

Legal and regulatory barriers can hinder the progress of grassroots initiatives, especially those advocating for systemic changes. To address these obstacles, grassroots women can collaborate with legal experts and partner with legal advocacy organizations to challenge unjust laws. They can also push for policy reforms through continued advocacy efforts and engage sympathetic lawmakers to support their causes.

### **Sustaining Momentum**

Maintaining long-term commitment and enthusiasm within the community is a challenge that requires innovative outreach strategies, educational programs, and mentorship. Balancing activism with other responsibilities, such as family and work, requires effective time management and strong community support systems to ensure that the momentum for change is sustained.

### *Policy Reforms and Achievements*

Grassroots women's advocacy has led to significant policy reforms and societal changes at local, national, and international levels. These efforts have resulted in:

- **Increased Representation:** Grassroots women have successfully campaigned for more women in political, economic, and leadership roles, leading to greater representation of women in public office.
- **Improved Access to Education and Healthcare:** Women's grassroots movements have helped improve access to essential services, particularly in underserved communities, by advocating for policies prioritizing education and healthcare for all.
- **Community Empowerment:** Through education, training, and resource mobilization, grassroots women have empowered their communities, enhancing self-sufficiency and improving economic outcomes.
- **Cultural Shifts and Awareness:** Grassroots women have been instrumental in challenging harmful stereotypes and promoting gender equality through advocacy, education, and awareness campaigns.
- **Environmental Conservation and Sustainability:** Many grassroots women have been at the forefront of environmental advocacy, pushing for sustainable practices and the protection of natural resources.
- **Social Justice and Human Rights:** Grassroots women's movements have championed social justice, fought against discrimination, and advanced human rights protections for marginalized groups.
- **Resilient Communities:** Grassroots women's efforts have contributed to the resilience of their communities by fostering strong social networks, organizing disaster response initiatives, and advocating for vital community resources.

### *Intersectionality and Solidarity*

Grassroots women's movements are increasingly recognizing the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression and advocating for an intersectional approach to activism. By fostering solidarity between various social justice movements, grassroots women can strengthen the impact of their work and create a more inclusive, equitable society.

### *Inspiring Future Generations*

The achievements of grassroots women serve as a source of inspiration for future generations. Their tireless work and accomplishments demonstrate that individuals and communities can indeed create meaningful, lasting social change. Through continued efforts, grassroots women are paving the way for a more just and sustainable future for all.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study concludes that women's empowerment creates resilience in women at the grassroots level to a great extent. Grassroots women play a vital role in creating resilient and sustainable social change. Their efforts at the local level not only mobilize communities but also address systemic issues, leading to a more inclusive and equitable society. The examples and strategies employed by grassroots women demonstrate their effectiveness in creating lasting change. Organized grassroots women are indispensable yet overlooked roles as drivers of community resilience. Through sustained mobilization anchored in the local level reality, these groups spearhead preparedness training, pioneer communal coping strategies, deliver women-focused services, manage vital information flows, and advocate tirelessly for equitable relief—despite oppressive burdens. Their integrated approaches simultaneously advance women's strategic interests while making entire communities more resilient. However, their vital contributions remain marginalized, lacking both targeted resources and a voice where decisions get shaped. Concrete measures centred on inclusion, directed funding, capacity building, and peer exchange are urgently needed to reinforce women's irreplaceable resilience leadership. Grassroots women stand ready to share their knowledge and drive time is now to genuinely bolster their efforts by redistributing power and resources to grassroots women.

## **7. Recommendation**

The article recommends that policy change on Dedicated Funding Mechanisms to establish targeted financial instruments and grant schemes specifically for women-led initiatives at the grassroots level. These mechanisms should prioritize innovation, inclusivity, and scalability, grassroots women need to be given support as change occurs from them. It can reduce external assistance, empower women, and increase the potential for more sustainable community development. In this regard funding unique women-led projects has the impact and benefits that would be felt beyond the women's groups, extending to the wider community.

## **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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