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Abstract

Community empowerment plays a key role in the working of society. Providing support and training opportunities to communities and promoting socioeconomic growth can be of fundamental importance to the progress of any region but is particularly important in rural areas. Women in rural communities frequently have been confined to playing roles in the home, despite recent literature suggesting that empowering them can boost the development of their communities. Drawing on inductive qualitative research, this case study describes the perceptions of five rural women from Sarapiquí in the Northern Region of Costa Rica after undergoing training in tourism entrepreneurship in the period 2015-2018. It also explores how their experiences and empowerment processes have contributed to their community. Centered on feminist theory, the study presents the women's perspectives by employing content and thematic analysis, using WebQDA software to digitally categorize semantic relationships. Data were collected and triangulated through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document gathering. Results show the participants' active involvement in the community, exploring the implications of their gender roles and of family influence (mostly that of immediate family), along with the women's individual perceptions of empowerment and their reflections on what it feels like to be empowered women. They experienced empowerment to be a driving force that favors their personal lives and that further influences community development, yet they note that the path to becoming empowered is challenging and time consuming. They also stated that their training and professional development processes were keys to consolidating their sense of empowerment in the community. This study seeks to better apprehend the experiences of women and the role they play in rural communities.

Keywords

community, Costa Rica, empowerment, entrepreneurship, rural tourism, women

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Empowered Women in a Rural Community: A Case Study in Sarapiquí, Costa Rica

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Community empowerment plays a key role in the working of society. Providing support and training opportunities to communities and promoting socioeconomic growth can be of fundamental importance to the progress of any region but is particularly important in rural areas. Women in rural communities frequently have been confined to playing roles in the home, despite recent literature suggesting that empowering them can boost the development of their communities. Drawing on inductive qualitative research, this case study describes the perceptions of five rural women from Sarapiquí in the Northern Region of Costa Rica after undergoing training in tourism entrepreneurship in the period 2015-2018. It also explores how their experiences and empowerment processes have contributed to their community. Centered on feminist theory, the study presents the women's perspectives by employing content and thematic analysis, using WebQDA software to digitally categorize semantic relationships. Data were collected and triangulated through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document gathering. Results show the participants' active involvement in the community, exploring the implications of their gender roles and of family influence (mostly that of immediate family), along with the women's individual perceptions of empowerment and their reflections on what it feels like to be empowered women. They experienced empowerment to be a driving force that favors their personal lives and that further influences community development, yet they note that the path to becoming empowered is challenging and time consuming. They also stated that their training and professional development processes were keys to consolidating their sense of empowerment in the community. This study seeks to better apprehend the experiences of women and the role they play in rural communities.

Keywords: community, Costa Rica, empowerment, entrepreneurship, rural tourism, women

Introduction

Empowered women are those who act following their own path, making their own decisions, facing up to challenges, getting up again after setbacks, and refusing to give up, having developed new perspectives based on a better understanding of their capabilities (Kimani, 2016). Empowered women may, for instance, “perform public speeches demanding their voices be heard in different scenarios” in demonstration of their competency (Romero Leal et al., 2022, p. 45). Empowerment may have many different manifestations but can be seen to commonly involve three main characteristics: personal behavior, teamwork in

achieving a common good, and the collective enhancement of skills through peer support (Espinach Rueda, 2022).

Empowered women acting as leaders and entrepreneurs can become agents that transform the economy of a region (Butcher, 2013; Erazo Caicedo et al., 2014). Empowering women can therefore lead to the creation of a pivotal feminine workforce that is capable of dynamizing socioeconomic growth in rural areas (Buendía-Martínez & Carrasco, 2013). Nonetheless, Buendía-Martínez and Carrasco (2013) demonstrated that women have many factors against them, such as lack of support, resources, grants, infrastructure, technology and more. It is therefore important to recognize that to achieve sustained rural development, women's needs must be catered to by means of contextualized tools such as political equality, support, opportunities for skill development, and access to financial resources (International Labor Office, 2019). Facilitating this workforce with the appropriate cognitive and practical tools can improve their performance, assisting them to overcome the difficulties inherent to their context, in which they commonly lack opportunities for training and growth.

United Nations Women and United Nations Global Compact (2022) established seven Women's Empowerment Principles, namely:

- **Principle 1:** Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality.
- **Principle 2:** Treat all women and men fairly at work – respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination.
- **Principle 3:** Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers.
- **Principle 4:** Promote education, training, and professional development for women.
- **Principle 5:** Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women.
- **Principle 6:** Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy.
- **Principle 7:** Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality.

While on the whole, these principles are oriented more towards companies than rural communities, they can nonetheless be seen to be essential to all contexts, with two being of particular relevance to this study: Principle 4 - Education and training for career advancement, which refers to providing women with equal opportunities in training and mentoring programs; and Principle 7 - Measurement and reporting, which emphasizes the need for transparency and clear accounts made regarding measures implemented to empower women, and the resulting progress achieved in community development.

Unfortunately, in Costa Rica efforts made towards implementing these principles can be seen to be sporadic, with little accountability shown with respect to long-term progress. On these lines, the Costa Rican Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (National Institute for Women) reports a lack of accountability and reporting in the country with respect to women in the community, particularly in the following areas:

- The impact that entrepreneurial women have on the country's economic growth.
- The main needs for the creation, development, and sustainment of women's entrepreneurial efforts, such as training, education, and support.
- Government actions that should be implemented to promote the sustainability of women's entrepreneurial endeavors. (Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres, 2016, p. 14)

The attainment of Sustainable Development Goals by rural women can be seen to be key to achieving the 2030 agenda (Naciones Unidas Cepal, 2018), especially Objective 5 - Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (Cediel Becerra et al., 2017). This objective cannot be attained if women continue struggling to achieve growth without the implementation of any real, sustainable, and contextualized change (Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres, 2018). Conditions for entrepreneurial women in Costa Rica have improved, as is reflected by the country's position in first place in Latin America and 20th worldwide on the Index of Women Entrepreneurs (Estrategia & Negocios, 2017). Nonetheless, a later study conducted during the pandemic showed Costa Rica to have lost some progress in this index (Mastercard, 2022), and certainly it is evident there remains a long way to go before women achieve equal opportunities to unleash their potential, a scenario that would be beneficial not only to themselves, but also their families, their communities, and the progress of the nation.

With the objective of better understanding women's empowerment processes in rural communities, this study centers on five women who make up part of a cooperative in a rural community in Sarapiquí, Costa Rica, describing their perceptions after having been trained in rural tourism and entrepreneurship between 2015 and 2018. Other contributions made by the study include adding to the literature on qualitative research into community development, social organizations, and women around the world.

This research takes the form of a case study, which seeks to describe the perceptions and opinions of a specific group (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Lichtman, 2012), in this case made up of five women. It presents an in-depth systematization of the subjects' experiences in their real context (Yin, 2018), a rural community in Sarapiquí, Costa Rica. It takes up an inductive, qualitative methodology, employing a descriptive design that draws on epistemological and ontological concepts from the constructivist paradigm (Grbich, 2007; Hatch, 2002).

With the aim of identifying the opinions and perceptions of a particular group of women from a rural community regarding their empowerment, the study's research questions are:

- 1) What are the opinions on empowerment of five women from Sarapiquí, Costa Rica, after having been trained in tourism entrepreneurship between 2015 and 2018?
- 2) What are the perceptions of empowerment of five women from Sarapiquí, Costa Rica, after having been trained in tourism entrepreneurship between 2015 and 2018?

Research Context

The participants are from a community located in Sarapiquí, Costa Rica. They are among the significant number of their community that became members of a cooperative founded over eight years ago through a community outreach program of the Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica (ITCR). With some vicissitudes, the cooperative has contributed to the community's development by participating in community roundtables with public institutions. For instance, with the help of allied institutions, the cooperative achieved improvement in roads and the construction of bridges leading to Braulio Carrillo National Park to make this accessible to local and international tourists. The cooperative has additionally participated in a professional development and training process provided by different public institutions, including the Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica. Through these mechanisms, several entrepreneurial endeavors came to life with the ongoing support of social investment programs to promote rural tourism.

The study focused on five women (all using pseudonyms of *mujer* (woman), and individually assigned the codes M1, M2, M3, M4, and M5) from the rural community of Sarapiquí, Costa Rica. Their ages ranged from 44 to 54 years old. One of these women did not complete primary schooling, two completed primary schooling as their highest level of education attained, one commenced but did not complete secondary schooling, and one has a university degree. All the women have lived in the community since they were children and have tight bonds with their families, who are also from the same community. Four are married, and one is single. Four of the women are entrepreneurs (M1, M2, M3, and M5) and one works as a teacher (M4). They all are active members of community associations and committees. All the participants were selected due to their participation in four community outreach programs since 2015, in which they have studied subjects related to entrepreneurship and rural tourism, additionally participating in a diagnostic process on English language proficiency (López-Estrada et al., 2021). This study started in 2020, therefore the most recent community outreach programs in the community are out of the scope of this investigation. The study was reviewed by the Extension and Research Committee of the School of Languages and Social Sciences at the Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica.

The rural community in which the women live is in the process of transitioning from being a community dedicated to primary activities to those directly and indirectly related to rural tourism. The participants perceive the community to be a friendly, peaceful, safe, and positive place, where its members aim at achieving progress for the betterment of their families and the community. Although the families are of low socio-economic status, they are hardworking, committed, and proactive.

Data Collection

Three methods were used to achieve data triangulation: semi-structured interviews, observations, and document gathering. The interviews made up the main source of data collection. Given that this is a qualitative study, interviews were used to capture the human experiences of the participants in terms of their perceptions of the research topic (Yegidis & Weinbach, 2006). The 45-minute interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. They were recorded and then transcribed prior to the coding process. An interview matrix was created and then validated by six experts on philology, philosophy, sociology, feminism, education, and project management. This matrix included open and follow-up questions to elicit the participants' perceptions (Yin, 2009). It consisted of four main sections, including questions on context, opinions, perceptions and experiences regarding tourism entrepreneurship and the women's empowerment resulting from the 2015-2018 training process. Each participant was asked personalized questions, and after the interviews were completed, some complementary questions were asked.

The aim of the observation process was to observe the participants as they undertook their routines within the community. These observations served as visual accounts used to construct the systematization of "logical and intentional sequences under a specific time range and scenario" (Campos y Covarrubias & Lule Martínez, 2012, p. 50). Minimal researcher interference was employed to maintain the focus of the observations, increasing the opportunity to record events and routines as these took place (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; Universidad de Jaén, 2010).

An exhaustive literature review was conducted during the first semester of 2021 to design the protocol employed (Anguera, 2003; Campos y Covarrubias & Lule Martínez, 2012; Del Cid et al., 2007; Díaz Hernández, 2014; Díaz Sanjuán, 2011; Navarro Ramírez, 2013; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; Universidad de Jaén, 2010). A guide for the observations was then created, made up of two sections, the first structured and the second unstructured. The

structured section was deductive, specifying units of analysis for observation based on four behavioral aspects: non-verbal, spatial/proxemic, vocal/extralinguistic, and verbal/linguistic, as follows:

1. Non-verbal behavior: body language and expressions, specifically facial expressions, eye contact (direct, uncomfortable, awkward, etc.) and body movements (standing up, poised, etc.). This behavior included eight different criteria to be observed.
2. Spatial/proxemic behavior: static movement or spaces with movement and action, including distancing, and personal and social space. This behavior had six different criteria to be observed.
3. Vocal/extralinguistic behavior: vocalization processes, including intensity, tone and pitch, silences, pauses, dominance, and interruptions. This behavior had four different criteria to be observed.
4. Verbal/linguistic behavior: verbal content and message, paying attention to the specific jargon of the participants in their community context. This behavior had seven different criteria to be observed. (Anguera, 2003; Universidad de Jaén, 2010)

The unstructured (inductive) section had no categories or benchmarks. The objective of this section was to gather information in an open forum (Campos y Covarrubias & Lule Martínez, 2012). It featured no controlled systematization, instead consisting of descriptive narratives and field notes taken as the observations took place.

The protocol and guide employed were validated by four experts from the Instituto Centroamericano de Administración Pública (Central American Public Administration Institute, ICAP) and the Instituto Nacional de la Mujer (National Institute of Women, INAMU). Once all suggestions were taken into consideration, the guide created was validated and piloted twice in the field. The first validation process occurred in July 2021 at a business directed at tourism in La Tigra, San Carlos. This process lasted for approximately two hours, with eight participants. The researchers took notes on the guide and reflected collectively to create an improved version of this. The second visit took place in Finca 5, Sarapiquí, in three different businesses directed at tourism. This second process lasted six hours and involved five participants. A final version of the guide was achieved by consolidating all feedback gathered during both visits.

The official observations for the study took place in Sarapiquí on November 12 and December 12, 2021. The first observation occurred during a visit by professors, directors, and vice rectors from the Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica, making up a total of ten external visitors, plus other community members and four study participants (M4 was not present for this observation). This observation occurred over seven hours and took place at three specific locations: El Ceibo (one of the entrances to Braulio Carrillo National Park), Rancho La Loma (a small restaurant belonging to one of the participants) and at a mini market at which the participants and other community members sold souvenirs. Four of the participants were present for this observation process, introducing themselves to visitors, and interacting throughout the seven hours. The second observation occurred during a seven-hour tour provided for tourists. This observation took place at different locations: El Oasis Waterfall, Rancho La Loma, Los Jícaros Trail, the Stevia Tour, the Vanilla Tour, the Pepper Tour, and at a mini market to sell local products to five visitors and the researchers. While one participant (M4) was only present at the beginning, at which time she made a presentation on the general community context, all participants in the study were otherwise present for this observation;

they each made a presentation on their small business aimed at tourism, interacting with other participants and being present during lunch time when their products were sold.

The final data collection method employed was document gathering. The participants were asked to collect evidence of their attendance and participation in different committees, cooperatives, and municipal councils in the form of communiques, logs, journals, records, and minutes.

For all data collection methods, the participants signed digital letters of informed consent and were assured that all information would be handled in a confidential fashion. Both the observation and document gathering worked as mechanisms to triangulate and validate the data collected in the interviews.

Data Analysis

This study is based on feminist theory, emphasizing feminist perspectives as a central theme, and focusing on women's experiences (Grbich, 2007). It explores women's participation in society and seeks to enhance women's voices, recognizing that these voices further influence the role of women in society (Hatch, 2002).

Content analysis was employed to analyze the interviews (Hatch, 2002), while thematic analysis was employed on the observations and documents to categorize the themes that are representative of the perceptions of the women in this study (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Content analysis demands persistent, critical, and systematic reviews of the data collected. To this end, in this study, five recursive phases were conducted: data familiarization, inductive codification, data categorization based on Spradley's (1979) semantic relationships (relational coding with a cover term and included terms), categorization review, and the description of salient categories. Thus, all interviews were transcribed, after which codes were generated using an inductive digital codebook created to summarize units of meaning. This led to the identification of categories reflecting the semantic relationships uncovered, revealing patterns that went from specific items to general themes. Similarly, thematic analysis was used to systematically identify patterns of meaning (themes) across the data set. After organizing and transcribing the data set, codes and categories were created, and finally, a search and review for themes was performed. Data were codified using WebQDA software designed to analyze qualitative data (Costa et al., 2019). Three main themes resulted from the semantic inductive coding, while subthemes were clustered into the three main themes.

To consolidate internal validity, three aspects were considered: triangulation (from theory, data sources, and the interdisciplinary research team), member checking, and the researchers' analytical memos. The research team held several reflective work sessions to properly analyze the data during its categorization. External validation was conducted by educational experts who provided insight regarding the data collection methods. Results were further verified by member checking conducted by the study participants.

Results

The results are presented based on the themes identified in the interviews, the observations made, and the documents gathered. First, the presentation is made of the participants' context and community, after which three main themes will be explained in detail: becoming empowered, the influence of family and social roles, and perceptions of empowerment.

The Participants in their Community

The participants of this study have been involved in a community development project that commenced in 2015 as part of a training process conducted by various public institutions, primarily the Instituto Tecnológico de Costa Rica. Being active in the community is vital to these participants. They consider themselves to be “rural women who’d had little or no academic opportunities.” Yet over the years, they have embraced a spirit of constant professional development as a mechanism to better themselves and their community. Their paths have been rocky, but they see themselves as fighters. M2 reflected on her life: “Sometimes there are obstacles in your way, and you get intimidated. So, you put your guard up, you toughen up, and you move forward. I feel life toughens you up. Sometimes you fall and must get up, dust yourself off, and continue, looking up, never down. [Laughs]. There are some things in life that you must decide on, you can make no other choice, and you can’t depend on anyone. Toughen up and fight, fight! If someone tells you that you cannot do something, you fight for what you want.”

The interviews demonstrated that the women possess a set of personal and reflective skills that have enabled them to achieve progress in their lives and their entrepreneurial activities. They show their awareness of the need to cope with difficulties to meet their goals, in particular those related to their small businesses. Some participants challenged themselves to improve their skills; for instance, M3 said she has never repeated the style of a hand-made product, instead creating different alternatives so as to be able to offer new options to repeat clients. M5 mentioned having struggled throughout her life. In her early 20s, she realized she wanted to become a tailor: “I found an old sewing machine and I started making some things, and I sold them! More people requested more items and I saw that as a source of income and, little by little, I began falling in love with it, and I have grown fond of it and better at it. My job is a blessing and I continue to be blessed.” M5’s entrepreneurship has led her to achieve other objectives as well: “I have been able to buy a piece of land, then, little by little, to build a house.” She reflected on the many times she struggled: “I had everything against me. I was scared, but I knew I could do it. I could become a tailor.”

The participants shared the goal of getting more training, and they talked about what they went through to achieve this. Regarding the training sessions held in 2017, M4 asserted: “[I] worked and studied, so it was very tiring and difficult for me. I had to study for tests and do homework at the same time I was studying to become a teacher at a distance education institute, and I practically had to drag myself to attend training sessions because I was exhausted.” M3 similarly emphasized how difficult it was for her to get to the training sessions, with her biggest challenges being distance and time:

I had to walk long distances and usually I was alone since my husband sometimes couldn’t walk with me [due to health problems], so I had to go alone. I overcame three things: the distance, walking alone, and the time needed to get training.

Participants also demonstrated strong self-reflective skills that led to the need to make life changes. M1 expressed:

I felt what impacted me the most was seeing the women working in that company. Some of them still work there. They are working from six in the morning until seven at night for one thousand Costa Rican colones an hour (approximately US \$1.60), no health insurance, no vacation time. Like slaves, since they cannot speak at work. They have no rights. That triggered me; how

is it possible that all they do is work with no other options? They had no hope for anything better. They will grow old in that company, and they will be kicked out of there, poorer than when they started off, really. That was the trigger. That is when I said, “We must do something. They need other options; they cannot continue to be exploited like that.”

M1 was similarly analytical regarding women in general whose self-esteem is impacted from when they are little girls who are taught to think they are useless: “Then you grow up believing that, mentally they program you not to do things.” She added:

The key here is education, which makes it possible for things to change. It has been a constant struggle and still the fight continues, especially in rural areas. Now women can choose to study, go to high school or university. If they study, they can free themselves.

During the observations the participants made presentations in different locations, in which the central topic was the unity of the community, with some mentioning their families as being part of the beginning of their small businesses; they also discussed difficulties, challenges, and even future projects. M1 presented the history of the community cooperative. M3 explained how she came to be a tailor and souvenir designer while also being a housewife. M4 described the community and even told an anecdote on how the community metaphorically decided to “back flora and fauna” in the community’s park, while showing artwork on the back of some playing cards featuring a flora and fauna design.

As part of the participants’ struggle to achieve progress in their community, they have actively participated in various committees working to enrich the region, in diverse areas including education, politics and religion. Acting to complement the other data collected, the documents gathered included communiques, logs, journals, minutes, and other written records demonstrating these women’s participation in community organizations and the cooperative. All documents were succinct, and corresponded to all participants except for M2, who mentioned that her time is very limited, and that although she is fully willing to participate and help the community, her participation is currently limited to acting as a member of the community cooperative. The remaining participants are active in the following committees: the Club las Orquídeas (the Orchid Club), Comité de Educación y Bienestar Social (the Education and Social Well-Being Committee), and the Administration Board and the Executive Board of the cooperative. They additionally participate in other strategic collaborations with other public institutions such as Instituto de Desarrollo Rural (Rural Development Institute, Inder), Sistema Nacional de Áreas de Conservación (National System of Conservation Areas, SINAC), and the Municipality of Sarapiquí.

The Club las Orquídeas is group dedicated to growing and selling plants led by and focused on women. M3, M4, and M5 are members of this club, for which they have worked as secretaries and substitute board members. Among the activities the group undertakes are organizing training sessions and other activities to raise money in coordination with other public institutions. The Comité de Educación y Bienestar Social promotes educational activities and events for the social well-being of the families in the community. M3 and M4 have worked as president and secretary in this committee and their tasks have included managing motivational activities, organizing elections for the community cooperative, raising money to help protect the environment, and promoting recycling campaigns. This committee demonstrates leadership, commitment, and the ability to delegate to other community members. The work it undertakes is intimately linked to the socioeconomic progress of the local community.

The cooperative's Administrative Board is the main committee in charge of the social agenda, the creation of policies, and the establishment of rules for this cooperative. All these functions are related to the cooperative's socio-productive activities, which mainly consist of administering its supermarket and promoting tourism in the area. M1, M3, and M5 are all members of this board, having worked as president, substitute board member and external observer.

The cooperative's Executive Board coordinates the specific activities of the cooperative, such as customer service provision, tours, and activities to raise money and manage resources. M1, M3, and M5 have performed various roles on this board, organizing activities for cooperative members and visitors interested in business and tourism in the community. They have participated as representatives in all sessions with other public institutions such as Inder, SINAC, the Sarapiquí Municipality, and the Sarapiquí Chamber of Tourism. They have worked and coordinated activities based on community needs to improve the local infrastructure, including bridges, roads, aqueducts, electricity services, and internet connectivity in support of local businesses.

The participants' work in these community organizations has been constant and of vital importance to these at least since 2015. Even during the pandemic, the participants remained active and aware of the importance of persistent organization, leading to benefits for the local community. This demonstrates the sense of belonging of the women with respect to their community and the public institutions that serve it.

Becoming Empowered

Some participants noted that the process of empowerment can begin at an early age, as something innate in many women, stemming from an aptitude for survival. M5 stated:

From very early, we were several siblings and we kind of raised one another. I was lucky because I was among the older ones, so we had to take care of the youngest ones. My oldest siblings were like my children. I was more like a mother than a sister, it was a big responsibility to take care of them. I also began to work at an early age, when my mom let me work, and then I oversaw buying food every two weeks and that is how I learned about different things.

On similar lines, M2 firmly believes she has always been empowered. She stated:

I had it in me (empowerment). I had to begin working from very early in life. I remember I was 10 years old when I had to begin working. I practically raised myself, my mother did not raise me. My father didn't either. I was on my own, I had to work, my life was very harsh... It is over now, but it was harsh. I learned to work hard and fight in life. I have fought all my life to survive, and to achieve what I want. I had it inside myself because of my upbringing. I worked in restaurants, the one in charge of the kitchen. Little by little, I learned how to do it. Then I worked in a company, packing plants. At one time I oversaw 20 women, and I had to learn to lead them. Overseeing so many people was challenging, and I had to learn how to do it. I have seen other people that were put in charge, and they could not manage, they did not have the ability to do it. I achieved it, I feel that I had it inside myself.

M1's story is similar:

I became an orphan when I was 10 years old, so I became a leader at that time, since I had to take care of my siblings. My oldest sisters got married and left. At 13 years old, I was the housewife, the mother of my siblings. I was in charge of everything. My brothers did not act on anything, everything was me... I think I had it inside myself to be a leader, first in my family.

In contrast, M4 stated she has witnessed how the process of empowerment of some women may commence at an early age, but it can be a long and arduous process leading to women who now “can speak easily; they can express themselves confidently.” Along these lines, M4 considers herself to be relatively empowered now, but states that this has been a process that has taken her years to develop: “Dealing with people such as parents, other teachers, principals, directors, supervisors, have made me more confident and empowered. I feel fulfilled, strong now.” She also agreed that the training sessions and workshops have helped her in her time-consuming and challenging process of empowerment.

M3’s experiences leading to empowerment were also an arduous path. She stated:

It was normal for me, watching women always work. I watched my mom work all the time, helping my dad. She was always in the house being submissive. She would do everything for him, fix his clothes, cook, and help him in the field. She was always there for him, yet I always wondered why my dad did not respond in the same way to her.

Once married, M3’s story changed. Her husband has significant health challenges, so she has had to engage in constant struggle and self-reinvention. She stated:

I have been fighting for my household for 10 years now. My husband, as you know, is unwell. So, life pushed me to be a problem-solver, not to be a “normal” woman in the house, cooking and cleaning. Instead, I had to be the “man” in the house, which was the role I had to embrace.

She states that her life circumstances forced her into a process of empowerment, which commenced as an innate capacity that she has had to develop as the years have gone by. Her husband’s disease pushed her to work harder than ever to be the sole provider in her household. She stated she was very afraid, yet “in the workshops I started losing fears. I started speaking up, not feeling nervous. Now, I proudly stand up and speak my mind and heart.” Her empowerment has thus been a slow and painful process, full of obstacles. Nonetheless, she remains positive and optimistic about her future and her on-going empowerment, in a process that is never-ending: “Life continues to hit me hard. I fall, I dust myself off, I continue on. I stand up stronger, always looking ahead.”

M1 agrees that the process of becoming empowered as a woman is challenging. She stated, “In this society, it is very difficult.” She voiced that there are many obstacles to women’s empowerment, indicating women’s family obligations tend to make everything more complicated. She stated that many women in the community are oppressed by “strict, authoritarian bosses and husbands so they have to work from Mondays to Saturdays, also doing chores in the house and cooking. They are very limited; their empowerment process is limited.” She firmly believes that:

Women always go uphill, swimming upstream. Nothing comes easy to women, since if a woman is clever and a fighter, there will be malicious men that might

want to take advantage of her. That is why women have to be alert, defending themselves from others.

She emphasized that getting started with a small business can be smoother and easier if the women get trained and prepared to face life, to fight for what they want.

Complementing the women's insights into their own processes of empowerment discussed in the interviews, the researcher observations were also able to shed insight and confirm the levels of empowerment achieved by the participants. During all interactions with visitors, the participants showed confidence standing up and introducing themselves, presenting their small businesses, and discussing their community and local tourism. They responded with calm self-assurance to the questions of their visitors. The entire time, and even in the face of unexpected occurrences, the participants showed poise and self-control. Their speech was unrushed and composed and featured clear messages. In performing the welcoming and introductory activities, as well as during their presentations, the participants were cordial and responsive, promoting authentic and genuine interactions with their visitors. The participants managed time and space appropriately during all activities. They strategically positioned themselves to be able to make explanations and address all visitors in the respective locations. They showed experience in hosting events for visitors, providing clear instructions at the beginning of each activity. Their speech featured informative and assertive messages, although some speeches could be noted to be short. Nonetheless, participants organized themselves to follow an agenda to manage time effectively.

Despite social distancing and the use of face masks, interaction with the visitors was an important and vital aspect of the observations. The individualized attention and service provided led to close, friendly interaction that was attentive to the visitors' needs. M1, for example, showed confidence, charisma, and humor in managing the logistics and timing of the agenda for the visits. M2 was fully in charge of the kitchen in her small restaurant. Although she did not have much contact with the visitors while preparing the food, on the visitors' arrival, she introduced herself and the menu. Her presentation was short, and she struggled at the beginning to establish eye contact and articulate her ideas, but as she spoke her speech improved. By the end, her speech was assertive featuring clear messages. M3 was always attentive and helped with the logistics, standing in front of the visitors to speak. Her presentation was solid and clear, though she struggled in establishing eye contact. M4's presentation was short, yet her speech was clear, she answered all questions and established good eye contact. Finally, M5 was poised, and her message was well-articulated. She constantly collaborated with M2 to make sure that welcoming and friendly interactions with all visitors successfully occurred. M3 and M5 presented their souvenirs in the mini markets, where they spoke confidently and clearly about their entrepreneurial endeavors and their products. Although the participants always wore facemasks, it was clear they were smiling and responsive in interacting with their visitors.

The participants showed a sense of leadership by embracing specific actions such as letting others speak up to better explain some aspects of the community, providing clear instructions for the activities, and making sure their visitors felt at ease. In leading the making of presentations in one visit, M1 called on another participant who she stated could best answer one of the questions asked by the visitors regarding one of the entrepreneurial projects. Further, throughout both visits, M1 played a leading role, monitoring timing to ensure the agenda was followed, and that all interactions and communications took place effectively.

The Influence of Family & Social Roles: Providing Obstacles and Providing Support

Women's families have been found to play a significant role in their empowerment processes (ONU Mujeres, 2014), yet these tend to subject women to contradictory influences, on the one hand being capable of providing motivation and encouragement, while on the other frequently imposing strong deterrents and obstacles, such as spouses failing to provide women with support, restricting their freedoms, or being physically and verbally violent against them (ONU Mujeres, 2014, 2019). Reflective of this type of contradiction, the study participants noted that their families took up three major approaches to their efforts to seek empowerment through training and professional development: being supportive; being unsupportive; and changing their views from one position to the other.

Along these lines, M1 stated that women face many obstacles in life, and that most of these come from "the family, the husband, and even the children." She asserted that many women have the potential to become empowered, but often specific circumstances and social roles, including financial, social, and educational dependency on their spouses, make this challenging. Indeed, social roles and the influence of women's families can be seen to frequently represent a barrier to women's professional development. According to M1, "Women have wings, but they get tied up." She elaborated that sometimes "families do not believe in women. Men make women believe they cannot do things, make them feel less. That is chauvinism." M1 is also reflective of the rural nature of their lives and their limiting socioeconomic conditions. M1 stated, "Generally speaking, my husband understands." Yet she also declared that there have been some occasions, especially if she comes home late from a meeting or an activity (after 9 pm) that her husband will question why she has arrived so late. She added, "Sometimes he complains." M2, when attending early workshops to develop her business project, also experienced difficult moments, such as her husband complaining about her coming home late:

I already knew [what was going to happen] so I would get home very quiet and submissive. I knew he was mad so I would smile and act humble, go straight to the kitchen [laughs nervously] to serve his food. He continued to be mad and then he would ask me if the following week was going to be the same, another session, another meeting, wondering when the training would end.

He even threatened her, saying, "If it is on Thursday again, then I won't be here (when you get home)." Before leaving for her training sessions, M2 would hurry to leave everything ready at home, but she knew that no matter how much effort she put into it, "there was always something bothering him," and there would be threats; her husband would say if she wanted to continue with the training sessions, it was better if she just left home altogether. Similarly, M4 reflected that it was challenging for her to attend the workshops since she had to juggle various obligations, meaning she had to "study, work, take care of the house and the children, take care of [her] husband... So, it was too much." Sometimes, she would tell her husband to attend the workshops instead of her. The women thus had to learn how to deal with their husbands' sometimes difficult and obstructive behavior to continue with their professional development processes.

The participants also felt that pressure to comply with social expectations is especially oppressive to rural women. They reflected on what a "normal" woman is. M3 emphasized, "A normal woman is the one that is at home, doing chores, making sure there is food for the man at home, all clothes cleaned and ironed, the house impeccable, working hard, but only in the house." She continued, "We were taught to be submissive and that our lives revolve around our husbands." M1 expanded on this:

A rural woman, to me, is a woman who always stays at home, being a housewife. She fully supports her husband, is devoted to him and the children. It is a woman who grows and harvests vegetables, a woman of the countryside, but only in the house.

To her, rural women:

Had no opportunity to study because their parents also told them that they were born to be mothers and housewives. Once they get married, as part of the patriarchal system, she becomes a mother and a housewife, only taking care of the kids and her husband, cooking and cleaning. Culturally speaking, this affects us deeply and we carry this forever. It is really very difficult to get rid of it.

Even other members of the community can have a negative impact on women's processes of seeking empowerment. M3 was critical of how others have judged her for "having failed my husband because I went to the training sessions, or because I run errands with other men, because women are not expected to mix and mingle with other men." She also stated:

Chauvinist men blame women for wanting to be free and independent. They feel that women do not abide by the social rules and do not want any responsibilities in the house. They are unable to see that women have other needs and a lot of potential outside the house, outside the expected role of being a housewife.

M3 talked about her own role in her family as not detracting from her independence as a woman. She explained:

Of course, it is the way I think... I have always believed that you get to share your life with your partner, but your partner does not have to provide you with everything. When I want something for me, I work hard for it. I am not my partner's property, and it is my life. That has always been my position. You only live once, and no one will live my life for me. I have always respected my husband and children, but I do what I want to do.

All participants stated that they have had to deal with negative reactions from others with respect to engaging in processes to seek empowerment. Nonetheless, they also mentioned an improvement in the perceptions of many regarding the roles they play and the importance of their professional development. M2 reflected that her husband's perceptions have changed over time. She stated:

He has understood that the ITCR workshops have been good. He has seen results. He has also seen that I want to thrive. I have been selling food and when I do so, I can help him pay the electricity and water bills. My small business has been the source of income to build my small restaurant. He knows that the money I make is for the household. At the beginning it was very challenging, but we have agreed that the money is for the household, him and my daughters.

She also explains how her small business began and how her husband helped her with it:

Very beautiful, I have it very beautiful, fully equipped thanks to lots of hard work. It has been lots of work, my husband, well, we did a lot. Sometimes we had money to buy the materials but not to pay someone to build it. We worked day and night. And my small restaurant, oh dear God, I adore it. We put everything into it, my husband and I.

She also stated.

(My husband) has now seen my business and he has changed a lot. He now supports me and sometimes he helps me in the restaurant when I have to provide food for big groups of visitors. He helps me. He has seen that I want to work, that I deserve to thrive, that I want to achieve my goals. That I need this for me, not for him.

With her husband changing from being doubtful to supporting his spouse in her business endeavor, M2 is extremely proud of her entrepreneurship, and thanks her husband for having been supportive to this.

M3, in contrast, enjoyed the full support of her husband and daughter even from the earliest workshops she undertook. Her daughter was the one who pushed her to pursue her dreams: “At that time, my daughter told me to do it. I was a bit indecisive, yet her support led to me to (participate in the workshops).” This was despite the attitude of one of her sons, who did not approve of the time she invested in training, since he felt that this was not going to bring any benefits to his mother.

Perceptions of Empowerment

In the interviews, the participants talked about empowerment in general. They addressed how this is perceived by community members and other rural women and discussed the influence of empowered women on the community. They also reflected on how they perceived themselves as empowered women in the rural community. Regarding what others—mostly family and community members—think about empowered women, the participants agreed that in general terms empowered women are seen positively. M1 stated, “My brother thinks that women are more courageous than men. At least in our family, women are courageous, more so than men. The men are not proactive, and we women are active, courageous.” M2 had a different viewpoint. She stated:

Some people think that because I work and have my own business that I am a liberal woman [of overly modern and progressive values], just because I fight for what I want. Some people think that liberal women just want to make money or be free from men, when it is totally the opposite. I work at home too, and I work in my business. I like to work, and I work hard; and my husband works too. He has his job, and I work because I like to work, and I like to have my own money. He is finally getting it, but a lot of people still think that just because a woman wants to work and make her own money that means she is a carefree, liberal woman. A woman that does not take care of her husband, who has no responsibilities at home or with her husband and children. Completely the opposite, I also work to help my husband and my children.

The participants also discussed their perceptions of other empowered women in the interviews. They all presented positive views in this regard. M5 stated, “They are women that

fight. They fight every day. They fight for themselves and for their families... Women that never give up, no matter how many obstacles they have, they never give up.” She added:

An empowered woman has her own opinion, she is confident when speaking, she can express her ideas clearly even if being a bit shy. An empowered woman is natural, she does not pretend to be someone she is not, in terms of her character and means of expression.

M2 and M3 agreed that empowered women are brave fighters who look forward to getting trained as part of their life struggle. M1 stated, “For a woman to be empowered, she must first be aware of her own abilities and let go of her fears, get out of her bubble and comfort zone, that notion that you can’t do anything.” She continued:

We are rural women with no money, we were never given the opportunity to study, but now we got training and there are plenty of options online. I feel that once a woman gets training, she begins to be empowered. Being empowered is to absorb information that we have inside ourselves, and putting this into practice in the world, putting aside our fears.

Three of the participants indicated that they considered M1 to be an empowered woman. M3 expressed, “You know M1, and some might say she has an okay life, but I know that at times she did not even have money to pay for things in her house.” Along the same lines, M4 stated:

M1 is an empowered woman, she is a very strong woman. She is a leader in the community, she is courageous, she makes no excuses. She could be sick or stressed or tired, but she will never say no. She is strong and firm. She is committed even when sick or tired. M1 has always been a role model to follow in the community.

M3 added:

When I was in the credit committee (working in the cooperative), and there was a big debt, at that time it was big, and she was a single mom... She is now in a better place and that is because she fought for what she wanted.

As was the case for M1, the other participants indicated that they considered M2 to be an empowered woman. For example, M1 expressed:

Often, we get visitors, and we have to do public speaking, and I want to highlight that M2 has had a very challenging story. I sometimes wonder how she has continued to survive, but well, God is good. He must have a purpose for her. She was very shy and now she speaks in public, after ITCR’s training sessions. She is confident and it is very rewarding to see the change in her. After so many years training, attending workshops, and it has been all worthwhile.

M1 added that in general the professional development process took the women out of their comfort zones, out of the mindset that they could only do housework all day long. She asserted that speaking, thinking, and writing during the workshops lead them to embrace new challenges, because some of them had not finished primary school. M1 mentioned M2, M3,

M4 and M5 as women who had had their female power awakened, the empowerment of potential that sometimes they hadn't even known they possessed: "They are different women now."

M2 sees her own sense of empowerment as highly linked with her entrepreneurship. She asserted:

For me, I feel empowered because of my restaurant, well, my small restaurant. I love it, I fight for it, I am fighting for it and not only for myself, but for others. I hope to have more women here.

M4 discussed the difference between a female entrepreneur and an empowered woman. She claimed:

An entrepreneur is not necessarily empowered since at the beginning, she can have an idea for a project or business and she can even get started with the project, requesting help and money, but up until then she is not empowered, or maybe she is, but she will not be empowered until she sees some results and she is fully convinced that the project will work, until she is confident it will work.

In this view, for a woman to be empowered, her business must begin to function well, it must be successful, while the woman herself must be independent, get to know and interact with people, and not be shy or nervous when working with tourists. M1 agreed with this view, stating, "Not all empowered women are leaders, since they can create a business as an internal affair for themselves, something personal. They might not even work in the business or help the community." She added that she felt that getting trained and being part of a professional development process prepares women to think of entrepreneurial endeavors.

The participants reflected on how empowered women influence the community. M5 believes that some people in the community have achieved their goals through learning processes such as training sessions and workshops, and that this is always reflected in more work and better organization for the community. She added, "An empowered woman or any empowered person has the ability to move masses, in the way the person speaks, thinks. This person can be a leader." M4 has similar thoughts with respect to the influence an empowered woman can have in a community. She stated:

I think that an empowered woman can be an example for other women, women that might be held back since they do not know how to move forward, or because they have not received any support or training, or because they had not seen any role models. But then they get to see a confident woman, a woman who knows what she wants, a woman who knows about a specific topic, a woman who can lead an entire community.

M2 agreed:

This community needs more courageous women, women that fight, women like M1, her husband too. They both are leaders here in the community. Because of them the community is moving forward, the projects, the roads. The road to El Ceibo (on the way to the national park), the bridges. They both fight for the community. In (M1)'s case, I feel that I can fight too, so I fight beside her... An empowered woman, a leader helps the community, always collaborating.

For her part, M1 is fully aware of her role in the community and the influence she has had. She indicated:

An empowered woman can hold meetings, she helps other women, especially those with fears, who do not have any experience being proactive. She can teach them to lead projects, to get prepared, to research, look for contacts, go to public institutions.

When asked to reflect if they are empowered women, the participants identified common characteristics that define them as such. M5 said she believes she is empowered due to her ability to make decisions, to be responsible, have a purpose in life, having goals, and fighting for herself and her family. She also reflected that being empowered means:

Not depending on anyone, not living life based on others' expectations, fighting for my own things, working hard and taking risks. To be confident in myself, in others, in what I am saying, how I am saying it. I feel empowered as a confident woman.

M3 also considered that being empowered is "knowing what I want, and working on it, yet not imposing myself on others... I feel it is to fight for what I want, fighting for it without taking advantage of others." She admits there are times when she has been doubtful, second-guessing herself, yet she sees taking risks is part of being empowered:

Sometimes I have asked my spouse for his opinion on something, and he has suggested that I not do it. Then I become doubtful, and I start overthinking. (Laughs). But then I decide to go ahead and do it: it might be good or bad, but I go for it because I want to experiment and decide, see what happens.

Similarly, M2 believes that being empowered entails a sense of resilience:

Being willing to do everything, and to constantly fight for something. For instance, I fight for my small restaurant. Sometimes I feel I cannot keep up. I have no money to continue with the project, yet I find a way and I continue on, since my project is my dream. My dream is also to be able to provide job opportunities for others so that they can also make money for themselves and their families, anything they want.

She also believes that an empowered woman must be a courageous leader in her entrepreneurial endeavors. M1 stated that being empowered means:

Forgetting about fears, getting out of the comfort zone, believing I can achieve things. To me, being empowered is to let go of fears, to speak up, to relate to other people. It also means getting trained, attending workshops, learning new things, because we have always been very limited as rural women.

She added:

I am a fighter for myself and for my community, especially for women. Now the community has more job opportunities for women. I am an empowered

woman due to all the training provided by ITCR. For that, I thank them, for making me an empowered woman.

Discussion

Although some doubtful and even negative feelings remain, the ingrained traditional beliefs disapproving of women engaging in training and starting up businesses that were held by some members of the participants' families and their community have gradually transitioned towards more supportive and less combative stances. This change can also be seen to be due to other developments that have taken place thanks to actions supported by the women participating in the study, such as improvements in the roads and the construction of bridges leading to the nearby national park to make this more accessible to local and international tourists. Thus, changes in community to be more supportive of women's efforts to achieve empowerment have occurred directly through the hard work of the women, who managed to achieve undeniably positive impacts on the community, directly enhancing the lives of many of its members. These women have thus not only been swimming upstream during the process of training and empowerment, but they have had to prove their value as empowered women to others. These situations have been the reality for many women (ONU Mujeres, 2014, 2019), who nonetheless continue to struggle towards betterment for themselves, for their families, and their communities.

The process of becoming empowered women requires resilience in the form of a never-ending ability to struggle against barriers, challenges, and difficulties to successfully achieve their goals. A common factor present in the participants' lives was that challenging and difficult situations abounded and forced them to seek self-betterment. Each participant had negative circumstances as starting points that disrupted their lives and placed them in a position in which they had to stand up and work to overcome these difficulties, which over time went on to form the foundation of their journey into empowerment. As mentioned by Kimani (2016), they thus encountered better versions of themselves.

The women in the study agreed that empowerment is a driving force that has worked in favor of their personal lives, and that has additionally had an impact on community growth. Specifically, these women have not only used their empowered mindsets and abilities to find ways to move forward in their own lives, but they have also contributed to the wellbeing of their rural community. Channeling their empowered selves to lead and represent others has meant going beyond personal benefit to become primary drivers for the development of their community, increasing opportunities for all, and acting as bridges to encourage and motivate other women to become empowered, as indicated by Espinach Rueda (2022). The way the participants perceive other women reflects how they perceive themselves as empowered women, contributing to a sense of community unity that leads to the betterment of the whole.

The training processes and professional development efforts that the women engaged in were key to consolidating their sense of empowerment in the community. Empowerment can thus be seen not to be based on a single event, but rather on a complex process which the participants perceived to stem from two major sources: (1) a process that begins with the women's attitudes, sacrifices and willingness to engage in that which is unsettling, embracing discomfort and fears to tackle barriers to achieve personal growth and meet their goals; and (2) the process of working through the input provided by external sources such as universities, public institutions and other providers to equip the women with cognitive and practical tools. The participants expressed how even after perceiving themselves as empowered, this quality can be improved with the help of people and organizations that can boost their capacities in benefit of their personal lives, their entrepreneurial projects, and their community, in alignment with the fourth principle for women's empowerment (United Nations Women & United

Nations Global Compact, 2022). When attempting to promote development in rural communities, it is crucial to understand how different approaches can benefit a community (Buendía-Martínez & Carrasco, 2013). Empowered women provide a clear example that access to knowledge can lead to both individual and collective growth. This validates the need for effective policies, objectives and programs that position women as central figures that, properly empowered, can work to overcome inequalities and deficiencies on national economic, educational, and social levels (Cediel Becerra et al., 2017; Naciones Unidas Cepal, 2018).

Conclusions

The results portrayed the experiences of five women in the context of their rural community, making an in-depth exploration of their struggles and coping mechanisms, their processes, their opinions, and their perceptions of empowerment. The study shed light on how these five women, subject to numerous family, social and financial limitations, nonetheless overcame these challenges and barriers to achieve their dreams and contribute to their community. It demonstrated the processes through which, drawing on their own personal resources as well as the support of external institutions and programs, the women came into empowerment, as recognized by themselves, by each other, by their families, and even by their communities, thanks to the contributions they were able to go on to achieve.

Women can empower themselves to overcome personal situations; however, such empowerment should be fomented with training and support through private or public institutions that maintain a long-term bond with the women to evaluate and document the real progress and benefits achieved in their lives and their environment. Furthermore, there must be improvement in the processes implemented to empower women in a way that seeks to ensure that their businesses, their careers, and their community's flourish. Further, this type of empowerment must be a focal point for direct and constant social assistance from the government. On a global scale, women have faced tough and unfair conditions and barriers, from which they have had to emerge through their own efforts. The study evidenced how empowered women are a powerful asset in a rural community; this makes it clear that governments must act with much greater commitment in this respect to overcome women's inequality to enable them to unleash their full potential for growth on a personal level, which clearly impacts on the betterment of the entire community. The women participating in the study demonstrated that empowering women could accelerate community growth. Such empowerment can be boosted by government investment and academic expertise, which should be encouraged through inter-institutional collaboration and programs.

This study holds great value for women and the community in four main areas. First, it seeks to apprehend the processes of detaching women's empowerment and their sense of contributing positively to their communities. Second, it generates reflection regarding the visibility of women and their influence in relation to the socioeconomic development of their community. Third, the collection of data and evidence based on ITCR extension projects can better guide other extension projects in rural communities, while giving evidence of the importance of these projects in rural communities, and extension projects in general. Finally, the results presented here offer insight into the challenges and experiences of women in rural areas, giving other women the opportunity to learn from and replicate these experiences as part of their personal and community growth.

The most significant limitation of this research was that it was conducted during the pandemic. All participants had to wear masks and always maintain social distancing during the observations. Additionally, community dynamics and social and tourism activities were considerably diminished. Document collection was particularly challenging since activities and committees were on hold due to the public health crisis. Another limitation of this study was

the small number of participants. Given that it is a case study, the findings cannot be generalized to other settings. Nonetheless, a qualitative case study such as this provides in-depth understanding of how women perceive empowerment and how that is reflected in their communities. In addition, the triangulation of data collection was used to validate the data provided by the participants.

The main objective of this study was to describe the perceptions of women who feel empowered and how such empowerment can contribute to their communities. Learning about this rural community in Sarapiquí, Costa Rica, can contribute to the national and international literature on community empowerment and eventual policy change from a feminist perspective with respect to socioeconomic progress. Further studies must be conducted that focus on recording community growth, that study other successful cases of women's empowerment and the effect of this on their communities, and that examine perceptions as they change from traditional mindsets to more progressive ones, all of which can assist putting into practice more holistic approaches towards the enhancement of rural communities.

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