



Assessing the challenges of Women Participation in community development Projects.

Kingu Msengi Daud*

Gender and Social Work Studies Department. Tengeru Institute of Community Development

P.O.Box 1006, Arusha Tanzania.

Affiliation: Assistant Lecturer

Email:kingudaudi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT :

This study critically examined the challenges influencing women's participation in community development projects, with a specific focus on water initiatives in Manyoni District Council (MDC), Tanzania. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain comprehensive data from 110 respondents—100 women and 10 key informants. Structured questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions were used to collect primary data, while secondary information was obtained from documentary reviews and relevant literature. Findings revealed that the most significant barriers to women's participation include inadequate access to information (78%), poor project planning (72%), poor communication among stakeholders (70%), and limitation of time (67%). Other challenges such as social norms and values (24%), lack of professional accountability (24%), and inadequate resources (26%) were found to be less influential but still relevant in shaping participation dynamics. The study concludes that sustainable community development cannot be achieved without the full inclusion of women in all project stages. It recommends integrating gender-sensitive planning, improving communication channels, and addressing socio-cultural constraints to enhance equitable participation. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on gender mainstreaming and community development in sub-Saharan Africa, providing insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and local government authorities seeking to promote inclusive and sustainable development.

Keywords. Participation, challenges, women participation, community development and projects.

BACKGROUND

Globally, women's participation in community development is recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable development. According to UN Women (2023), empowering women enhances social inclusion, improves project efficiency, and promotes economic growth. International frameworks such as the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* particularly Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) emphasize women's involvement in community decision-making as key to achieving equitable development. Despite these efforts, structural barriers such as limited access to education, information, and leadership opportunities continue to restrict women's engagement in community projects worldwide (World Bank, 2022). Studies by Hope (2015) and WHO (2019) highlight that women's active involvement in water management improves sustainability and equity, yet they remain underrepresented in global water governance structures.

Across Africa, women play a central role in community welfare, natural resource management, and household livelihoods. However, entrenched patriarchal systems, gender stereotypes, and low literacy levels continue to hinder their participation in development activities (Oino, 2020; Mazana & Mutarubukwa, 2017). In many African countries, community water projects are vital for improving public health and reducing poverty, but women's involvement often remains limited to implementation rather than leadership roles. Studies in Kenya and Ghana have shown that projects with greater female representation in planning and management are more successful and sustainable (Oduor, Mwangi & Ogada, 2021; Kamara, 2022). Nonetheless, gender inequality in community governance persists due to poor policy enforcement, inadequate information sharing, and traditional cultural norms that limit women's public engagement.

In Tanzania, government policies such as the *National Gender Policy (2000)* and the *Community Development Policy (2018)* advocate for inclusive participation in local governance and development projects. Despite these policy efforts, women's participation remains low, particularly in rural areas where patriarchal traditions and limited access to education prevail. Studies by Losindilo, Mushi, and Mbeche (2010) and Ndirangu (2017) reveal that women often face exclusion from planning stages and decision-making processes due to gender stereotypes and inadequate access to project information. Additionally, Mbogori (2014) found that women's multiple domestic roles and time constraints further limit their ability to attend meetings or take part in project management. In Manyoni District Council, community water projects are frequently designed and implemented through top-down approaches led by external experts or donors, leaving women as passive beneficiaries rather than active participants. This situation highlights the need for targeted strategies to improve women's inclusion through better communication, gender-sensitive planning, and community empowerment initiatives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Development Projects

Community development projects are core initiatives for intervention of common problems while enhancing development in most communities (Oino, 2020). With this in mind, different projects are formulated and carried every year with different purposes such as ensuring clean water supply, improving community health, reducing poverty, promoting human rights and peace, managing natural resources, climate change adaptation and many more. These projects work to provide solutions and hope to communities in need such as rural areas where majority of population in developing countries dwells (Mohammad, 2019).

Community Water Projects

These are initiatives that involve local communities in the planning, implementation and management of water supply and sanitation systems (Hope, 2015), these projects aim to provide sustainable and reliable access to clean water and sanitation services, particularly in rural or underserved areas. (WHO, 2019)

Theoretical literature review

The study was guided by Ladder of citizen participation model and Liberal Feminist theory which are clearly described under this section. The selection of these theories is based on the fact that they advocate for the right of women to take active role in development activities in order to foster gender sensitive development.

Ladder of Citizen Participation Model

The ladder of citizen participation was proposed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969. It is one of the most widely referenced models in the field of public participation. According to Arnstein genuine participation requires authentic redistribution and reallocation of power in decision making, that is; citizen participation is citizen power. There should be power shift from powerholders to powerless so as to have voice and control over different issues that affect their lives. That is to say, participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless.

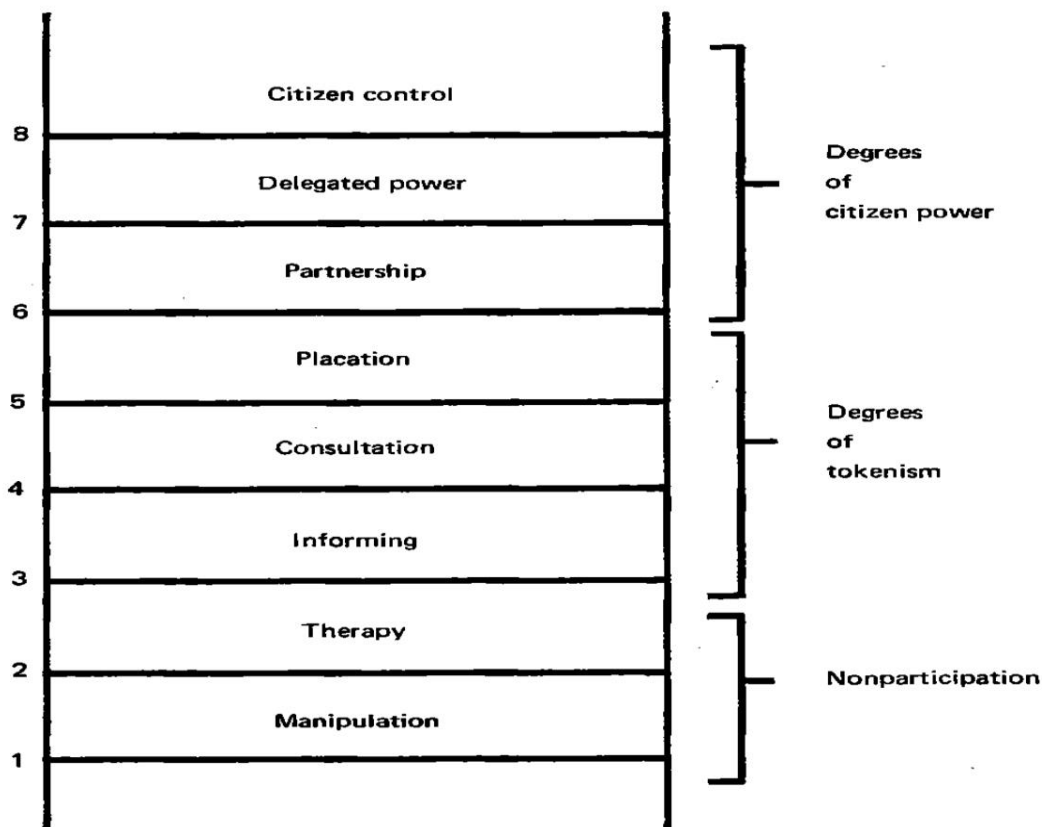


Figure 1: The ladder of citizen participation

Source: Adopted from Arnstein (1969).

Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation described participation basing on eight (8) rungs which are categorized into three (3) types. The ladder with ascending rungs metaphorically representing increasing levels of citizen agency, control and power. In addition, agency, power and control move from non-participation (no power) to tokenism (passive) to degrees of citizen participation which is real participation. The eight rungs are manipulation,

therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated and citizen control. According to Arnstein, manipulation is the lowest degree of citizen control, agency and power while citizen control is the highest degree of citizen agency, power and control. Power, agency and control over the process shift from externals (power holders) to the local people (powerless) with the increase in the level that means; from manipulation to citizen control. Manipulation and therapy are the lowest stages in which power, agency and control is more to externals, hence fall under non-participation category. Informing, consultation and placation stages fall under tokenism category in which local people are involved in some stages which implies that, they have power and control to some extent. Partnership, delegated power and citizen control are in citizen power category where power, agency and control are more to local people than to externals (outsiders), this is what is called the real or authentic participation.

This model has got different limitations, including: the claim that, in most cases the have-nots really do perceive the powerful as a massive system and powerholders actually do view the have-nots as the class and caste differences among them. In reality, neither the have-nots nor the power holders are homogeneous blocs as each group encompasses a host of different points of view, significances, competing vested interests and disintegrated subgroups. Another limitation is that, the ladder does not include an analysis of the roadblocks to authentic citizen participation and empowerment on the have-nots' side, including; attitude, knowledge-base and difficulties of organizing a representative and accountable citizens' group. Also, the model describes that participation is automatic, starting from manipulation to citizen control. In real sense, it is not easy as in order for the local people to actively take part, they should be capacitated so that they can decide on issues affecting their lives and involve in implementation of different activities to bring about transformation. This model is relevant to specific objectives. Finally, the model emphasizes the level of participation in which women should engage in community development projects.

Liberal Feminist Theory

Lorber (1997) was the first proponent of the liberal feminist theory which is rooted in the belief that the gender differences between men and women are not biologically based. This argument has been supported by Greer and Greene (2000). Since the gender differences are not biological, then the theory thus propounds that men and women are not socially different and thus should not be differently treated in the communities.

The perceived inequality that is found in the communities is believed to have emanated from local traditions and beliefs as per the liberal feminist theorists. The traditions thus created predicaments that prevent women from making progress in different fields in life. The predicaments are said to face women with or without either formal or informal structures in the course of their daily lives.

Liberal feminists believe that for women to succeed, the predicaments need to be solved thus the concept of gender equality and gender equity. The ways to solve these predicaments include instituting policies that promote gender equity in the society (Mazana and Mutarubukwa, 2017).

This theory is equally relevant in this study as it criticize the existing gender inequality in community development project and sees it as merely a social construction as opposed to biological construction. This theory suggests that the extent and levels of women participation is determined by the society because both men and women were born equal and can equally participate in community development projects. Therefore, the theory is significant as it proposes some changes to be pioneered from the community and grass root levels.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed research approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather comprehensive data. The quantitative approach involved structured questionnaires with close-ended questions to collect first-hand numerical data, while the qualitative approach included literature review, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions to gain deeper insights into participants' perceptions and experiences regarding women's participation in community development projects.

A descriptive research design was employed, using a case study strategy to obtain realistic, in-depth information from the field. This design allowed flexibility, reduced research costs, and facilitated an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing women's participation in the Manyoni Water Project. The study area was Manyoni District Council, selected due to its numerous development projects and observed low levels of women's involvement, influenced in part by prevailing patriarchal norms.

The target population comprised women beneficiaries of the Manyoni Water Projects, with individual women as the unit of analysis and households as the unit of reference. A total of 110 respondents were selected: 100 women for quantitative surveys and 10 key informants for qualitative data collection. Sampling techniques included simple random sampling for households and purposive sampling for key informants, ensuring the collection of relevant and valid data.

Data collection methods included qualitative techniques such as interviews with community development officers and project managers, as well as focus group discussions with women participants to explore attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. Quantitative data were collected through household surveys using semi-structured questionnaires to obtain demographic, socio-economic, and participation-related information. Secondary data were obtained through documentary review of official reports, statistics, and relevant literature to complement primary data.

For data analysis, qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify key patterns and themes, while quantitative data were coded, organized, and analyzed using SPSS (Version 20) to produce statistical results. The combination of these approaches enabled a comprehensive understanding of the levels of women's participation in community development projects within Manyoni District specifically quantitative data was analysed using descriptive analysis.

FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION.

Socio-economic and Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

This study examined five key socio-economic and demographic characteristics of respondents: sex, age, education level, marital status, occupation, and income. These factors were considered important in understanding participation in community development projects, particularly water projects in Manyoni District.

**Table 1.explain further;
Socio-economic and Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (n = 100)**

Categories	Frequency	Percent
<i>Age of Respondents</i>		
≤ 20	1	1.0
20-29	18	18.0
30-39	37	37.0
40-49	24	24.0
50-59	14	14.0
60-69	4	4.0
≥70	2	2.0
Total	100	100.0
<i>Education Level of Respondents</i>		
No formal education	5	5.0
Primary education	55	55.0
Secondary education	30	30.0
Tertiary education	10	10.0
Total	100	100.0
<i>Marital Status of Respondents</i>		
Married	89	89.0
Not Ever Married	5	5.0
Divorced	4	4.0
Widow	2	2.0
Total	100	100.0
<i>Main occupation of Respondents</i>		
Crop or and animal husbandry	58	58.0
Entrepreneurship	35	35.0
Business	03	3.0
Employed	04	4.0
Total	100	100.0
<i>Income Level of Respondents (in TZS per adult equivalent per month)</i>		
0 -10,000	20	20.0
11,000 -30,000	40	40.0
31,000 -50,000	30	30.0
Above 50,000	10	10.0
Total	100	100.0

Source: Field data (2024)

Age Distribution: Age is a crucial determinant of labor availability, decision-making, productivity, and participation in community projects. Respondents ranged from below 20 to above 70 years. The majority, 61%, were aged 30–49, representing the most active and responsible participants. Younger respondents (≤20 years) and the elderly (≥70 years) were the least involved, as younger individuals had limited responsibilities, and older individuals often perceived themselves as less influential in community decisions. Age also influenced creativity, adoption of innovations, and women's economic participation, which in turn affected community productivity and development outcomes.

Education Level: Education enhances the ability to use knowledge, adopt innovations, and engage effectively in development projects. Most respondents (55%) had primary education, 30% had secondary education, and only 10% had tertiary education. Low education levels may limit awareness of gender equality and reduce effective participation in community projects. Educated individuals are more likely to adopt improved techniques and challenge gender norms, contributing positively to community development.

Marital Status: Marital status affects responsibilities and labor availability. The majority of respondents (89%) were married, reflecting traditional family structures where married couples contribute labor and resources to community initiatives. Married respondents were generally more responsible and engaged, while widows (2%) were few. Marriage also supports gender-balanced participation, as families manage household duties collectively, enabling women to engage in development activities.

Occupation: Occupation determines income sources and availability of labor. Most respondents (58%) were engaged in crop and animal husbandry, while 35% participated in entrepreneurship, and smaller percentages were involved in business or formal employment. Farming, although labor-intensive and rain-dependent, provided accessible entry into economic activities. Occupation diversity, including off-farm activities, allowed households to supplement income, supporting participation in community projects.

Income Level: Income influences participation by enabling households to contribute to and benefit from community projects. Most respondents (40%) earned between TZS 11,000 and 30,000 per month, below the national poverty line of TZS 26,085. Income limitations can reinforce gender disparities and affect participation in development projects, as households with higher income have greater capacity to engage actively.

Overall, the socio-economic and demographic profile indicates that middle-aged, married, moderately educated farmers with low-to-moderate income were the most engaged in community development projects, while the youngest and oldest groups participated less due to limited responsibilities or perceptions of exclusion. Education, marital status, occupation, and income levels strongly influenced participation, gender balance, and overall effectiveness in community initiatives.

The challenges of women's participation in MWPs

The question on challenges facing women participation in community development projects were instituted to the participants. The study initially wanted to find out whether respondents knew explicitly on the concept participation in Water Project and whether men do play their due part in supporting women participation in Manyoni Water Project. A two-tier response system of 'yes' and 'no' was registered for respondents. Respondents were needed to respond to all items provided. Table 2 shows the challenges facing women in participation in community development projects especially in water project. Therefore, according to the finding above four challenges were mentioned by more than half of the respondents as indicated below in table 5.

Table 2: Challenges of Women Participation in water project (%)

S/N	Challenges of Women Participation in water project (%)	Yes	No
1.	Limitation of time	67	33
2.	Poor planning	72	26
3.	Inadequate information	78	22
4.	Lack of professional accountability	24	76
5.	Lack of transparency	59	41
6.	Conflict of interest among stakeholders	54	46
7.	Inadequate income	52	48
8.	Lack of awareness	60	40
9.	Inadequate resources	26	74
10.	Social norms and values	24	76

Source: Field data (2024)

Findings from Table 2 indicate that four main challenges greatly influence women's participation in water projects in Manyoni District Council (MDC). These are inadequate information (78%), poor planning (72%), poor communication among stakeholders (70%), and limitation of time (67%). Other challenges, including social norms and values (24%), lack of professional accountability (24%), and inadequate resources (26%), were perceived as less significant. The major challenges are summarized below.

Inadequate Information

The study found that 78% of women reported inadequate information as a key factor limiting their participation. Effective participation requires timely and accurate information about meetings and activities. However, the study revealed an absence of meeting schedules and poor dissemination of information. According to interviews conducted in Muhalala Ward (March 25, 2024), women often miss participation opportunities because projects follow a top-down approach, driven by central government directives, leaving limited room for local engagement.

Supporting literature by Lee and Kwak (2012) emphasizes that poor information flow increases complexity in implementing participatory approaches. Similarly, Kullab et al. (2016) found that communication between communities and local governments is essential for effective participation. Yanagihara (2001) also argues that collaboration among all actors—governments, aid agencies, civil society, and private sectors—through information sharing enhances development impact. Ndirangu (2017) further observed that women's limited access to education and resources restricts their engagement in community development. Overall, inadequate information and weak communication channels significantly hinder women's active involvement in water projects.

Poor Planning

About 72% of respondents identified poor planning as another major barrier. Planning processes are often dominated by external experts or donors, with minimal community and women's involvement. An interview at Manyoni Urban Ward (April 1, 2024) revealed that donor-funded projects typically adopt a top-down approach, leading to poor ownership and unsustainability.

Lusuva (2009) similarly found that women's exclusion from project planning results from patriarchal structures and gender bias, which marginalize them from decision-making processes. The study concludes that women's involvement at all project stages—particularly during planning—is critical for both effective participation and project sustainability.

Limitation of Time

Time constraints affected 67% of women participants. Most women bear heavy domestic responsibilities such as household chores, childcare, and caring for the elderly, leaving little time for community involvement. This aligns with Mbogori's (2014) study in Narok District, Kenya, which found that women's multiple roles severely limit their participation in development activities. He recommends community sensitization and government collaboration to promote gender-balanced participation. Hence, domestic workload remains a key barrier to women's engagement in community projects.

Social Norms and Values

Social norms and values were cited by 24% of respondents as minor yet influential barriers. Cultural expectations and traditional restrictions—such as prohibitions against women speaking before men or attending evening meetings—limit participation. One respondent explained that women are expected to return home before sunset, making it difficult to attend late meetings. Additionally, the use of local vernacular languages during meetings discouraged women's contributions.

These findings are consistent with studies by Losindilo et al. (2010) and Wambu (2017), which found that entrenched cultural norms in Tanzania and Kenya restrict women's public involvement and decision-making. However, Mukoni et al. (2018) observed that even when women attend meetings, their participation often remains passive. This implies that addressing gender norms, ensuring transparency, and promoting inclusive practices are essential for achieving equitable participation.

The study concludes that inadequate information, poor planning, communication barriers, and time limitations are the main challenges hindering women's participation in water projects in Manyoni District. Although social norms and values were less significant, they still contribute to women's marginalization. Enhancing communication, involving women in planning, reducing domestic workload constraints, and challenging restrictive cultural practices are essential measures to promote meaningful women participation and ensure the sustainability of community water projects.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that women's participation in community development, particularly water projects, remains hindered by multiple interrelated challenges. The most pressing issues limited access to information, inadequate planning, poor stakeholder communication, and time constraints stem from both structural and social barriers. Despite government and donor efforts to promote participatory development, women often remain at the periphery of decision-making processes due to entrenched patriarchal norms and lack of institutional support.

Furthermore, socio-cultural expectations and traditional gender roles continue to restrict women's freedom to engage fully in community affairs. These constraints not only weaken project outcomes but also limit the potential for sustainable development at the community level. Therefore, empowering women through education, leadership training, and access to information is essential for fostering equitable participation. A shift toward inclusive governance and participatory planning is necessary to transform women from passive beneficiaries into active decision-makers and leaders in development initiatives.

Ultimately, promoting gender equity in water projects is not merely a social justice issue it is a developmental necessity. Empowered women contribute to improved community welfare, efficient project management, and greater sustainability of resources.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the conclusions in section, the study recommends the following.

Strengthen Information and Communication Channels

Establish reliable and transparent communication systems such as community notice boards, local radio programs, and digital platforms to ensure timely dissemination of project information. Women should be informed early about meetings, roles, and decisions to enhance their participation.

Address Domestic Time Burdens

Introduce community-level initiatives such as flexible meeting hours, shared domestic labor advocacy, and child-care facilities to ease women's workload and enable broader participation in public activities.

Challenge Social and Cultural Barriers

Conduct ongoing sensitization campaigns targeting both men and women to dismantle cultural stereotypes and promote gender equality. Religious and community leaders should be engaged to support inclusive participation.

Capacity Building and Leadership Development

Provide training for women in leadership, project management, financial literacy, and communication. Strengthening women's confidence and skills enhances their ability to influence community decisions.

Institutionalize Accountability and Policy Support

The government should enforce policies that mandate gender representation in all community development committees. Continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must be established to ensure inclusivity and transparency.

Promote Gender-Inclusive Project Planning

All stages of project design and implementation should intentionally involve women. Development actors and local governments must adopt gender mainstreaming frameworks to ensure that women's voices are integrated into decision-making processes.

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GENERATIVE AI

I confirm that, no generative AI tools were used at any stage in the preparation of this work.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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