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THE IMPACT OF SAVINGS GROUPS ON FEMALE AGENCY: INSIGHTS FROM VILLAGE SAVINGS AND LOANS ASSOCIATIONS IN NORTHERN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we examined how participation in savings groups like the Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) influence women's agency in rural Ghana, i.e. their ability to freely participate in group activities and act on other issues and matters that affect them. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from VSLA and nonVSLA members to compare the effect between participants and nonparticipants. We used three dimensions of agency adapted from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) to assess female agency: women's participation and decision making in groups; women's comfort with public speaking; and women's decision making in their households. A significant finding of this study is that VSLA membership has enhanced the agency of female participants as they are more economically and socially active and can act on their own compared to women who did not use the savings group.

Contribution/ Originality

This study significantly contributes to the growing evidence of the impact of Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs). The research explored how women's participation in VSLAs influences their ability to freely participate in group activities and personally act on issues that affect them. The evidence provided by this study demonstrates how the VSLA model can be adopted by development agencies and practitioners as a tool to drive women's agency.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mostly the poor lives in rural areas of developing countries and has limited access to financial services. Notwithstanding their complex financial decisions, they have limited range of financial tools to address their ever-changing needs (Collins *et al.*, 2009). However, the available formal and informal options mostly lack flexibility and are risky and expensive to the rural poor the majority of whom are smallholder farmers. In the quest to improve rural households' access to financial services many nongovernmental organizations and development partners have promoted informal savings-led microfinance groups that mimic and develop the model of informal associations indigenous to many societies (Karlan *et al.*, 2017).

In recent years the Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) concept pioneered by CARE International has become an increasingly popular tool among development practitioners. The VSLAs have become an important source of funding for both household expenditure and farm enterprise, particularly for women who are more marginalized in access to finance. There is growing evidence of the impact of VSLAs on rural peoples' access to financial services and better incomes and livelihoods. Statistics from the VSL associates suggest that the VSLAs model has been introduced in about 75 countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and has reached over 17 million active participants worldwide with women comprising 78% of the membership (VSL Associates, 2018). The primary purpose of the VSLA is to offer essential savings and loan services to rural people who would otherwise not have access to financial services. These associations are mostly self-managed and provide members with a secure place to keep their money, get loans, and get emergency support (Ksoll *et al.*, 2015). With the VSLA model a group of farmers meet regularly not only to save, but also to be able to borrow from their savings. The emphasis of this method is on saving, building assets, and provision of credit facilities comparable to the needs and repayment strength of the borrowers. Indeed, this approach offers a poverty reduction component to the economically disadvantaged, particularly women (Kesanta and Andre, 2015).

Some studies have emphasized the impact of VSLAs on rural savings, access to loans, household food security, living conditions, and livelihoods. For instance, Ksoll *et al.* (2015) in a randomized cluster trial in Tanzania reported evidence of a positive and significant effect of VSLAs on several household outcomes including the number of rooms in a dwelling, household expenditure, and the number of meals consumed per day. This effect was attributed to the increase in savings and credit obtained through membership in VSLAs, which increased agricultural investments and income. Similarly, CARE International's evaluation of the impact of VSLAs in Ghana, Malawi, and Uganda showed that there was an increase in savings among members in all three countries (Karlan *et al.*, 2017). It was evident that VSLAs substantially increased the range of financial services available to members with increased access to loans as a result of the VSLA program. Similar impact stories have been reported by other studies (such as Anyango *et al.*, 2007; IPA, 2012; Lowicki-Zucca *et al.*, 2014; Wireko-Manu and Amamoo, 2017; Karlan *et al.*, 2017).

However, the impact of VSLAs on women's empowerment has not been sufficiently studied. Because women are the majority and most active in the VSLAs, there is the need to explore how VSLA participation impacts female agency. This study therefore seeks to analyze the effect of VSLA participation on female agency, that is, their ability to freely participate in group activities and act on other issues and matters that affect them.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The concept of village savings and loans associations

Financial inclusion has received considerable attention in recent global social and economic debates. In Ghana, access to financial services by the poor, particularly those living in rural areas is limited due to issues such as availability of financial institutions, proximity to clients, adequacy

of loans provided, timeliness and cost of services offered by financial institutions (Egyir, 2010). To address this, VSLA model initiated by CARE international in the early 1990s has been implemented by several development agencies and practitioners. The VSLA is a community-based self-managed group funded by members who contribute to a pool of savings in regular meetings, offer credit facilities to its members from the savings, and collaborate to implement systems that ensure transparency and repayment, with a minimum group membership of ten (10) to a maximum of thirty (30). Each group has a management structure which typically includes chairperson, secretary, box-keeper, money counter, and up to three key keepers (Anyango *et al.*, 2006). Weekly, members, purchase shares at an agreed value based on the group's constitution, borrow from the group fund, and are required to pay at a given period, usually within four weeks, with interest. The interest charged on loans varies from one association to the other as the group determines this. The interest charged on loans is eventually shared among group members at the end of the cycle during share-out. At the end of a cycle, the group may choose to share out all or part of the accumulated savings in the proportion of the number of shares purchased per an individual during the cycle (Anyango *et al.*, 2006). An essential component of the VSLA is the social or solidarity fund. This is a quota set aside by the group to assist members in emergencies such as illness or death in the family, and members can access other social support such as marriage and naming ceremonies in the form of an interest-free loan or cash grant (Karlan *et al.*, 2017). For these purposes, disbursement of the social fund is assessed and determined by the group.

2.2. Effect of the village savings and loans associations

The VSLA model is widely recognized as a powerful tool for delivering financial services to the rural poor where formal financial services are non-existent. Indeed, a plethora of studies in different regions of the world have sought to establish the impact of VSLA participation on the socio-economic outcomes of participants and their households. Some studies have confirmed the effect of VSLA on livelihoods, food security, and asset ownership. For instance, Anyango (2005) in an assessment of savings group in Malawi found that the savings group programme improved the livelihood of members through increased household incomes, especially among women participants who comprised a majority of the members. The author reported that members of the savings group diversified into additional income generating activities while others expanded existing activities, but they were found not to be investing in capital intensive activities. Similarly, Allen and Hobane (2004) established that participating in group savings and loans contributed to increased levels of productive and household assets among the majority of members' in Zimbabwe. The number of income generating activities per household was found to have increased, with an associated increase in households' time allocation to income generating activities. However, the study found no variation in the diversity of these activities. Indeed, similar findings have underscored the impact of VSLAs (Lowicki-Zucca *et al.*, 2014; Beaman *et al.*, 2014; Ksoll *et al.*, 2015). It is noteworthy, however, that some recent studies including that of Karlan *et al.* (2017) did not find any evidence of average impacts on household income, consumption, food security, or asset ownership but rather observed results related to non-farm business operations and women empowerment.

The effect of savings groups on women empowerment has not received much attention, and empirical studies in this domain continue to be inconclusive. CARE Tanzania found in a study on VSLA and women empowerment that participating in the savings group increased members' self-confidence and role in decision making (CARE, 2006). Also, Karlan *et al.* (2017) found that community-based microfinance groups lead to an improvement in women's empowerment in Ghana, Uganda and Malawi. They observed that women who were VSLA members displayed an increase in their influence on household decision-making. In contrast, researchers in Mali found no significant impact of savings groups on women empowerment (Beaman *et al.*, 2014). Also, Kabeer (2005) concluded that while women's participation in microfinance programmes facilitates their access to financial services and contributes to their economic empowerment, it does not

"automatically" empower women. The author stressed that although there is evidence that participation in microfinance programmes can influence women's role in household decision-making, it does not occur uniformly in all contexts or in all areas of decision-making.

2.3. Measuring female agency

The literature on empowerment highlights resources and agency as the two most common components of empowerment. However, most discussions on empowerment consider resources as not empowerment in itself but a means to achieve empowerment, although agency and resources are not easily separable in developing empowerment indicators (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002). Agency, the second component is central to many conceptualizations of empowerment. The World Bank (2012) defines agency as "an individual's (or group's) ability to make effective choices and to transform those choices into desired outcomes." Women are usually disadvantaged regarding their ability to make effective choices in a range of spheres. However, agency is intrinsically important and influence other spheres of empowerment, including the transformation of resources into well-being outcomes (Fernandez *et al.*, 2015). For example, the linkage between women's agency and family planning, household health and nutritional outcomes and agricultural productivity has been well documented (Quisumbing, 2003; Do and Kurimoto, 2012).

The Women Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) developed by USAID's Feed the Future initiative is a survey-based index that measures the empowerment, agency, and inclusion of women (Alkire *et al.*, 2013). An individual is said to have expressed agency within a domain when the person has adequate achievements that surpasses a threshold for that domain. These domains reflect aspects of empowerment found in the literature. For instance, the leadership aspect encompasses key features of participation, inclusion, accountability, and local organizational capacity cited by Narayan (2002). Also, the agricultural production decision domain directly follows Kabeer's (1999) definition of empowerment as the ability to make choices. Alkire (2007) asserts that since agency could differ across different spheres of life and can manifest in diverse ways, it is essential to identify and compare agency achievements in various domains.

Some researchers have questioned the self-reported measurement of empowerment, arguing that this approach may lack validity since it is influenced by biases resulting from the presence of other household members during the interview, the recall period, sequence of questions, and information available to the respondent. However, others (such as Jupp *et al.*, 2010; Alkire *et al.*, 2013) contend that since empowerment is an idiosyncratic concept, its measurement may be weakened if self-reported indicators are not used. The WEAI applies both objective and self-reported indicators. For instance, an objective indicator would be an individual's group membership, and a related self-reported indicator would be the individual's comfort with speaking in public.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Study area

The study was conducted in the Northern and Upper East regions of the northern part of Ghana. It must be noted that this study covered the 'old northern region' which included the present-day Savannah and North East regions. Until recently (February 2019) when the two regions were carved out of the Northern region, the region had the largest share of the total land area of Ghana, covering about 29.5% of the total land mass of the country with a population of 2,479,461 (GSS, 2010). The total population of the Upper East Region is 1,046,545 comprising 48% men and 52% women. The population is primarily rural (84.3%) and scattered in dispersed settlements. With only 15.7% of people living in urban areas the Upper East region is considered the least urbanized in the country. Agriculture is the main economic activity in the study area with about 80% of the total population directly or indirectly supported by agriculture and related activities (GSS, 2010). Vegetation in the regions is predominately a grassland interspersed with guinea savannah woodland.

3.2. Sampling, data collection, analysis

This study set out to assess the effect of VSLA membership on women's agency in selected districts of the Northern and Upper East regions of Ghana. A mixed method approach was used drawing on quantitative and qualitative data, while leveraging on its "opportunity to compensate for inherent method weaknesses, capitalize on inherent method strengths, and offset inevitable method biases" (Greene, 2007). Quantitative data were collected through a well-structured questionnaire in a face to face interview. A multistage sampling approach was employed in selecting districts, communities, and ultimately respondents. Two districts were purposively sampled from each region based on the concentration of VSLAs and the number of years in operation (minimum of three years). Twelve (12) communities were selected through a simple random sampling approach based on the list prepared earlier. Female members with membership in VSLAs who had operated for more than three years were listed in each of the communities. The total of 265 women was recorded, and this served as a basis for the VSLA sampling. Following the formula $n = N/1 + N(\alpha)^2$ and operating at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, 145 women who had participated in the VSLA for at least three years were sampled. In addition, about two thirds (95) of the determined sample size were also selected for women who were not members of the VSLAs. Therefore a total sample size of 240 female smallholder farmers were selected for the study. 20 respondents in each of the selected communities were randomly selected for the interview. All administered questionnaires were completed.

The chi-square and t-tests were used to ascertain whether the difference between the two groups is significant. Many of the indicators used in this study were adapted from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI). The WEAI is a multidimensional tool designed to examine women's agency, inclusion, and empowerment in agriculture (Alkire *et al.*, 2013). Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). 12 focus group discussions were held. A focus group comprised 6-8 participants purposively selected from the study communities. All interviews were tape recorded with consent from participants and later transcribed. Thematic analysis was performed to bring out the relevant constructs and categories across transcripts and synthesized with quantitative data for comprehensive analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

Sociodemographic characteristics are important factors that could have implications on an individual's development trend (Leinbach, 2003) and could influence a person's contribution to decision making in the family (Gupta and Malhotra, 2006). The study therefore explored respondents' sociodemographic characteristics (Table 1). The number of respondents sampled for the study was 240 female smallholder farmers, out of whom 60.4% belonged to a VSLA group and 39.6% were not VSLA members. The results of the study showed that the majority of the respondents (98.2%) were from households which comprised male and female members, and 4.5% from female adult-only households with no variations across respondent type. The majority of respondents (83.1%) indicated that their households were headed by men; 16.9% were from households headed by women. The average household size was 10.95 (SD=7.54) with no significant difference between VSLA and non VSLA members (see Table 1). 53.5% of respondents were in monogamous marriages; 36.6% were in polygamous unions, 1.5% were single, 6.4% were widowed. The remaining 2% were either divorced or separated. From the gathered qualitative information the high percentage of married people was attributed mainly to the perception in most societies in the northern regions that married adults are responsible community members. It was also mentioned that Islam, the predominant religion in the area, frowns upon unmarried adults. It is well documented that marital status can influence the roles and responsibilities as well as the occupation of members of households and their families (Dennis and Peprah, 1995). The youngest survey respondent was 18 years old, the oldest was 70. The average age was 39.6 years (SD = 9.94) with no variation across respondent type (see Table 2).

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics		VSLA members (n=145)	Non-VSLA members (n=95)	Pooled (n=240)	P-value
Sex of household head	Male	83.5	82.0	82.8	0.653
	Female	16.5	18.0	16.9	
Household type	Male and Female adult	94.5	97.9	95.5	0.489
	Female adult only	5.5	2.1	4.5	
Marital status	Single	1.4	1.8	1.5	0.899
	Married (monogamous)	52.4	56.1	53.5	
	Married (polygamous)	37.2	35.1	36.6	
	Separated	0.7	1.8	1.0	
	Divorced	1.4	0.0	1.0	
	Widowed	6.9	5.3	6.4	

Table 2: Summary statistics of the characteristics of respondents

Variables	VSLA members		Non-VSLA members		t-value	Pooled sample	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		Mean	SD
Age	39.75	10.02	39.25	9.84	0.325	39.61	9.94
Household size	11.18	7.47	10.39	7.76	0.672	10.96	7.54

4.2. The impact of savings groups on female agency

In this section we discuss how female smallholder farmers' membership in VSLAs enhances their agency. Many of the indicators used in this study were adapted from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI). Women's agency was assessed based on three domains: women's participation and decision making in groups; women's comfort with public speaking; and women's decision making within their households.

4.3. Group participation and decision-making

Results of the study showed that there was a significant difference between VSLA and non-VSLA women in terms of their group membership ($p = 0.000$). Among the non-VSLA members, just about one-fourth (25%) indicated they had membership in any group whereas all (100%) women in the VSLAs reported membership in at least a group. Apart from their membership in VSLAs, 38% of women in VSLAs reported they had membership in other groups (see Table 3). Group membership is an essential tool for female smallholder farmers as it enhance farmers' access to information and productive resources such as inputs, credit, and extension services. For instance, [Salifu et al. \(2012\)](#) reported that farmers with group membership are able to get easy access to extension services, credit facilities as well as markets, unlike those outside farmer groups. [Jetten et al. \(2015\)](#) observed that membership in social groups act as a social resource that drives personal self-esteem. Thus women's membership in VSLAs has the potential to enhance their self-esteem within the communities, mainly due to the social support provided by VSLAs. Indeed, this was confirmed by focus group participants and during in-depth interviews. The VSLAs are reliable social security for its members who fall back onto them in times of need, including funeral support, marriage, health and other social needs. The platform it has provided for networking within communities as well as the savings and loans component is a further boost for enhancing women smallholder farmers' agency and quality of life. Emphasizing the benefits of VSLA membership, one female member had this to say:

"I can say there is an improvement in my access to credit now. Previously, I will just be thinking of how to get money, you will go to someone and tell the person all that is bothering you, and after all this, you will still not get the money. So this VSLA has taken away that disgrace where

you will have to narrate your situation to people who at the end cannot help you. I can boldly say that my family will not go hungry and I feel proud that I can assist others in my community."

Similar to this assertion, some earlier evaluation studies have suggested that membership in VSLAs can nurture the self-respect of members and aid in building up social capital within communities, especially amongst women (Casini and Vandewalle, 2011; Deininger and Liu, 2013; Weingärtner and Pichon, 2017). Among other benefits, women in VSLAs ranked their increased access to loans (72.9%) as the most essential benefit they have received as members. These benefits portray the financial and social empowerment of women who are members of the savings group (see Table 3). Earlier findings by Weingärtner and Pichon (2017) have confirmed that such benefits accrued from self-helped savings groups can help members to acquire assets, improve their financial security and ultimately reduce their overall vulnerability.

Table 3: Group characteristics of VSLA members

Membership in Other groups	Frequency	Percentage
Agricultural/livestock producer's group	8	22.2
Credit or microfinance group	5	13.9
Trade and business association	6	16.7
Other social groups	17	47.2
Expectation for joining VSLA*		
Access to finance	131	90.3
Access to information	78	53.8
Access to inputs	76	52.4
Access to market	31	21.4
Benefits from VSLA membership*		
Increased access to loans	105	72.4
Emergency support	90	62.1
Greater access to farm inputs	80	55.2
Acquisition of capital assets	52	32.9

*Percentages are computed from multiple responses

Interviews with smallholder farmers who were not members of any savings group revealed that inability to raise entrance fees or share contribution, inconvenient group meeting location, and husbands' decision against joining VSLAs were the primary reasons they did not belong to the VSLA. In one of the interviews, a non-VSLA member indicated that:

"The last time I talked to my husband about joining the VSLA, but he will not accept because he is against the idea of me joining any group in the community. I can't save because I live in the same room with him so if he sees I've kept any money in the room he will question me."

Regarding their group decision-making power, a chi-square test results showed there was a statistically significant difference between women participating in the VSLAs and those who were not members ($p = 0.000$). When asked "How much input do you have in making decisions in your group?" the majority of women (55.2%) participating in VSLAs indicated they had most to all say (rating of 4 or 5 on scale of 1-5) in group decisions compared to 9.5% of their non VSLA counterparts (see Table 4). During the various focus group discussions, it was mentioned that the governance structure of the VSLA has made women more active in group decision making, both in mixed and women-only VSLA groups. It was emphasized that increased leadership roles by women in the savings groups has been vital and enhanced women's group decision-making power, and are able to challenge some structural barriers (such as male dominance) in their various groups, even aside from the VSLA.

Table 4: Input comparison of respondents in group decision making

Level of input	VSLA members (%) (n=145)	Non-VSLA members (%) (n=24)
No input	9.0	54.8
Input into very few decisions	12.4	11.9
Input into some decisions	23.4	23.8
Input into most decisions	36.6	0.0
Input into all decision	18.6	9.5

4.4. Comfort with public speaking

Comfort in speaking in public is critical for rural women to represent themselves and others. Table 5 presents a comparison between women in VSLA and their counterparts who do not belong to the savings group. Overall, women in VSLAs reported higher levels of comfort in public speaking than do their counterparts who do not belong to any savings group. The gap between VSLA and non-VSLA women is highest when protesting misbehaviour of those in authority (i.e. in terms of arguing issues out with their male counterparts or persistently seeking clarifications and not being docile). The results show that 51.7% of women in VSLAs and 26.2% of non-VSLA women reported “feeling somewhat to very comfortable” (a score of 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5) ($p = 0.034$). Among the non-VSLA members, 45.3% expressed high levels of discomfort (a score of 1 or 2 on a scale of 1-5), compared with 26.2% of those with VSLA membership. Although some women mentioned during focus group and informal discussions that they recognize their husbands and other male counterparts as lead persons in public discourse in conformity with their culture, women in VSLAs have become more assertive due to the exposure they have received as members. It was mentioned that they had been exposed to training programs (such as leadership and public speaking) that have enhanced their assertiveness and can speak out their opinion at community meetings. For example, in one of the communities, it was reported that women whose monies were supposedly locked up with a Financial Institution were mobilized by their leadership to negotiate a deal with the Bank officials. Others also mentioned that their active participation in the groups' activities and the demand of their weekly meetings have made them more engaged and confident to express their views at both group and community meetings. Indeed, the ability for women to speak confidently on public issues individually and collectively is a prerequisite to challenging existing institutions and social norms that affects their wellbeing. Similar to our findings, [Amin *et al.* \(1998\)](#) in their study on the impact of microcredit on women's empowerment found that members of the savings programme outperformed non-members in all three empowerment indices. The authors also reported that women who were members of the savings program were more confident than the non-members. This findings also corroborate that of [Hashemi *et al.* \(1996\)](#) who reported an increase in women's self-confidence as a result of their interaction outside the household through the activities of a microfinance programme. According to [Duflo \(2012\)](#), empowering women is not just important for women themselves, but instead, there is a strong correlation between economic development and women empowerment. For instance, women's ability to publicly ask extension officers questions relating to their farm or public health officers on issues relating to their children's health and nutrition affects their agricultural productivity and household's health outcomes. Also, this result is comparable to that of [Waller \(2014\)](#). On the contrary, [Beaman *et al.* \(2014\)](#) in an assessment of the impact of a village-based savings group in Mali did not find any effect of savings group on empowerment.

Table 5: Comparison of comfort level between VSLA and Non-VSLA women when speaking in Public

Issues	VSLA members (%)			Non-VSLA members (%)			P-value
	Little to none	some	Somewhat to very	Little to none	some	Somewhat to very	
Development	22.1	24.1	53.8	40.5	26.2	33.3	0.034

Infrastructure							
Ensure proper payment of wages	25.7	22.6	51.7	38.1	35.7	26.2	0.007
Protest the misbehaviour of authorities	22.5	23.1	54.4	45.3	28.5	26.2	0.004

4.5. Women's Decision-Making within Smallholder Farmer Households

4.5.1. Decision-making input into productive activities

Table 6 presents results on women decision making input into productive activities in the household. The results generally show that women's decision making on productive activities was low among the respondents. However, women in VSLA groups have proportionately higher decision-making input into productive activities than those who do not belong to VSLAs. Specifically, there was a significant difference between VSLA members and non-members' decision making in terms of marketing of crops, deciding the types of crops to grow, raising livestock and engaging in non-farm business activity (see Table 6). The low women personal decision-making could be attributed to the local tradition which recognizes male as a figurehead and subsequently the principal decision maker. It is well documented that women control fewer assets, have less autonomous income, and have less control over household decisions than men (World Bank, 2012). In Ghana, traditionally men are frequently identified as the primary decision-makers in production, as they are more often in control of productive resources such as land, labour and capital (Akudugu *et al.*, 2012). However, during the various focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, women in the VSLA confirmed that there had been an improvement in their decision-making input into productive activities. This, they attributed to the financial empowerment gained through their participation in savings groups which has made them more active in household decision making. In line with this finding, Karlan *et al.* (2017) found a positive effect of increased access to savings and loans through women's participation in VSLA on intra-household decision making. Although economic growth can advance the material conditions for exercising agency, the World Bank (2012) asserts that women's ability to increase their bargaining power within the household and accumulate personal assets hinges on women's ability to earn their income. On the contrary, other researchers have debunked the assertion that economic empowerment will lead to overall empowerment of women (Joshi, 2014; Guerin *et al.*, 2013).

Table 6: Comparison of VSLA and non-VSLA women's decision making on productive activities

Activity	VSLA members			Non-VSLA members			P-value
	Male head/husband (%)	Female head/Wife (%)	Joint (%)	Male head/husband (%)	Female head/Wife (%)	Joint (%)	
Agric. production	29.0	23.4	47.6	36.8	12.3	50.9	0.279
Inputs to buy for agric. Production	29.7	17.2	53.1	42.0	12.3	45.7	0.270
Types of crops to grow	23.5	37.2	39.3	36.8	17.6	45.6	0.017
Marketing of crop produce	17.3	32.4	50.3	26.3	22.8	50.5	0.043
Raising Livestock	36.6	30.3	33.1	43.9	12.3	43.8	0.028
Non-farm business activity	26.2	33.8	40.7	28.1	15.8	56.1	0.037
Own salary or wage employment	21.4	34.5	44.1	26.3	26.9	46.8	0.547

4.5.2. Decision on household expenditure

Regarding decision-making on household expenditure, women generally reported higher joint decision making on both major (such as a large appliance like refrigerator, motorbikes, TV, etc.) and minor (such as food or other household needs) household expenditure. Although women in VSLA groups reported proportionately higher sole decision-making making in both major (28.3% VSLA women; 12.3% non-VSLA women, $p = 0.047$) and minor (25.2% VSLA women; 17.9% non-VSLA women, $p = 0.179$) household expenditure. In discussions with women in the VSLA, it was mentioned that ability to contribute to the household's expenditure has made them more active in household decision-making. Compared to when they were not in the VLSA, most of the women reported they could make more financial contributions to their families' development, including payment of school fees, health insurance bills, and acquisition of family assets such as bicycles. Their participation in the savings group has improved their access to financial products and capital, and as a result, some women are undertaking new economic activities (e.g. petty trading, retail trading in agricultural commodities and food vending). In explaining how VSLA membership has contributed to women's decision-making in the household, a member noted that:

"When we did the share-out, and I sent the money to the house, and my husband saw the money then we used it for our girl's school fees, and now he has even joined the group. Now anything he does he will consult me, my wife what should we do, but first, those things were not there, whatever he did you have to take it like that, whether you like it or not, because you cannot contribute".

We found this as a positive development since women's involvement in household decision making has been recognized as a sign of empowerment (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002). Most of the VSLA women respondents often spoke of the fact that they do no longer overly depend on their husbands for every basic need, but instead, they are in the position to support their husbands, and this has brought peace and happiness to their households. Emphasizing this point during an in-depth interview, a respondent had this to say:

"With the VSLA intervention I am able to support my husband to meet the household needs, and we are all happy. My family members can eat well, take care of our health insurance premiums, and very happy because we can also dress well. In the past, we were unable to meet these family needs and often resulted in quarrels amongst family members. With the VSLA intervention."

Generally, although some women own and control valued assets, the majority are constrained by traditional norms and low level of education in their asset ownership and decision making within and outside their households. The Social Institutions & Gender Index (SIGI) confirms that culturally accepted patterns that women control more "feminine resources," such as household utensils whereas more "masculine resources," such as cash crops are to be managed by men, create barriers to women's access to and ownership of highly valued assets (SIGI, 2012). However, evidence from this study suggests that VSLAs have the potential to make women more economically active and improve their asset ownership, contribute to the household needs and make them productive in the household decision. According to the World Bank (2012), women's income influence their ability to accumulate physical, human, and financial assets. Indeed, this has an implication for a woman's ability to cope with shocks, invest and expand her earnings and economic opportunities. Consistent with our findings, Deere and Leon (2001) reported that improvements in women's financial position could challenge acceptable social norms on women's role in the household and community. On the contrary, Waller (2014) found that household decision-making and access to and control over household assets is dependent on the individual personalities of the husband and wife.

Table 7: Decision on household expenditure between VSLA and Non-VSLA women

Expenditure	VSLA members			Non-VSLA members			P-Value
	Male head/husband (%)	Female head/Wife (%)	Joint (%)	Male head/husband (%)	Female head/Wife (%)	Joint (%)	
Major Household expenditure	40.7	28.3	31.0	52.6	12.3	35.1	0.047
Minor Household expenditure	22.1	36.6	40.8	33.3	17.5	49.1	0.179

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was set out to examine how women's participation in savings groups, such as the Village Savings and Loans Associations, influence their agency that is, their ability to freely participate in group activities and personally act on issues that affect them. We used three dimensions of agency adapted from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) to assess female agency: Women's participation and decision-making in groups; women's comfort with public speaking; and women's decision-making within their households. The results of the study have shown that women's involvement in VSLAs has enhanced their agency as they are more economically and socially active. The evidence-based information provided by this study should prompt development agencies and practitioners to promote the VSLA model as a critical tool to drive interventions that aim to enhance female agency and eradicate poverty.

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