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# Female empowerment and risk within women's groups in rural Central Uganda

## Master's thesis in risk management and societal safety

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# Acknowledgements

# Abstract

This thesis sought to explore mechanisms that lie behind female empowerment in rural Central Uganda and the risk factors women meet when engaging in women's groups. The research has been guided by the following problem statement: "What makes women in rural Central Uganda actively participate in women's groups?". The results show that for many women, engaging in a women's group is more than a way to learn a new skill or meet other women in the same situation. It can also lead to a change in self-perception and self-awareness, thereby acting as a vehicle towards her empowerment. The data collection that formed the basis for this thesis was to a large extent carried out through field research with a fellow student researching water security in Central Uganda. Interviews, questionnaires and observations were conducted during the field trip. Being two researchers has been useful, as it facilitated the data gathering, the analytical interpretations and the quality assurance of the collected data. The work has led to the following main findings:

- Female leaders are empowering women in their communities by being role models, changing mindsets and acting as a "push" to help some women to change their lives.

- Helping women to help themselves (through, for example, capacity building and counselling), is a sustainable way of making women less dependent on their husbands and changing the power structures in households, benefitting both women and men.

- Women's groups are seen as highly important for the women in the communities and engaging in them is a way to improve one's life. It is further regarded as a way to build resilience and reduce risk.

- Risk factors in engaging in groups are: Defying one's husband, an increased workload and mental factors (such as stress).

- Reasons for engaging in women's groups in spite of these risk factors are: To increase income, capacity building, social reasons and to improve one's life condition.

- Lack of opportunities for employment is a major challenge for women in the communities studied.

- Commonalities between female leaders lie within personality, traits, motivations and cultural factors concerning gender roles.

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# List of abbreviations

FGM          Female genital mutilation

GBV          Gender based violence

GOU          Government of Uganda

RQ          Research questions

UN          United Nations

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# 1. Introduction

This year marks the 25th anniversary for the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UN, 1995). The declaration is "the most comprehensive and transformative agenda for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls" (UN Women, 2020, p. 1). Even though female empowerment is widely recognised as a global policy objective and there are numerous international commitments for gender equality in humanitarian action (e.g. UN General Assembly, 2015; UN Security Council, 2000; The European Consensus on humanitarian aid, 2008, §2.5-23,24), there is a lack of targeted investment in women's empowerment, livelihoods and resilience (UN Women, 2018a, p. 5). A review of the execution of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, states that "its implementation has fallen far short of the initial promise" (UN Women, 2020, p. 1).

Empowering women is "smart, offering one of the most cost-effective ways to save lives, build resilience, speed up recovery, and ultimately prevent crises from occurring in the first place" (UN Women, 2018a, p. 2). Drolet, Dominelli, Altson, Ersing, Mathbor and Wu (2015) state that "women's knowledge, agency and collective action must be fully recognised and supported to build resilience, reduce disaster risk and contribute to sustainable development" (p. 446). In relation to these claims, anticipating, analysing and managing risk is a requisite for sustainable development (Becker, 2014, p. 148). The factors presented in this paragraph are all regarded as fundamental factors for societal safety, defined as "society's ability to maintain critical social functions, to protect the life and health of the citizens and to meet the citizens' basic requirements in a variety of stress situations" (Olsen, Kruke and Hovden, 2007, p. 69).

Reports and research within the developmental sector concerning disaster risk reduction, climate change, gender equality and the like tend to label some groups, especially women and children, as "vulnerable" (e.g. Ariyabandu, 2009; Hamidazada, Cruz and Yokomatsu, 2019; UNDP and UN Women, 2018a; UN Women, 2020). There seems to be a shortage of academic literature and reports from international organisations that shift the focus over to looking at women's strengths and capabilities, especially in the context of community development. Scharffscher (2011)

provides an exception in writing "limiting women to the role of victims however, easily could add to their trauma" (p. 67). Furthermore, research suggests that women are more likely than men "to manage and use natural resources on a daily basis, to organise locally to address immediate family and community needs, to be effective communicators" and "they are strong informal leaders but under-represented politically" (Twigg, 2015, p. 94). Hence, it would seem important to highlight gender differences and imbalances, especially when discussing susceptibility towards, for example, disasters or to achieve sustainable development (UNISDR, n.d.). As we shall see in the following chapter, Uganda is currently undergoing major developmental progress. Yet, Nykvist (2016, p. 19) identified a lack of working opportunities as the main challenge for women in specific rural communities in Central Uganda. Women's leadership is not only a means to build resilient communities, it is also an end in itself (Smyth and Sweetman, 2015, p. 407). However, it would appear that women's lack of leadership opportunities deny them the instruments they need to alter the status quo (Opare, 2005, p. 90). How are women supposed to work towards a more fulfilling, independent and sustainable life when constantly being trapped in the role as helpless victims?

As we mark the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, gaps in the research concerning women are more important to fill than ever, as the progress of women around the world has been "incremental, uneven and insufficient" (UN Women, 2020, p. 2). Concerning community leadership, Opare (2005, p. 91) points out the lack of research on the situation of women in leadership and decision making in small rural communities in Africa. Similarly, Nkomo and Ngambi (2009, p. 50) point out that studies of women leaders and managers in other parts of the world than the United States and Europe are miniscule. To contribute in filling these gaps in knowledge, this thesis calls attention to some of the mechanisms that lie behind the empowerment of women in rural communities.

The themes for this thesis are thus female empowerment, female community leaders and risk factors that are met when engaging in women's groups, with a geographical focus on rural Central Uganda. The thesis has a focus on how women can be strengthened and used as a resource for themselves, their families and their local communities. Hopefully, this study can

contribute to an improvement in the rhetoric of policies and humanitarian reports. As findings will discover and describe current risk factors, they should make an important contribution to the field of risk reduction and societal safety.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 1 gives a general introduction to the topics dealt with in this thesis. Chapter 2 provides a contextual backdrop concerning Uganda and women's standing in the country. In chapter 3, relevant theories for the themes dealt with throughout this work will be elaborated on. Chapter 4 provides a description of the methodology, while chapter 5 is devoted to the empirical findings gathered during the field work and the research. Finally, chapter 6 provides the discussion, before chapter 7 provides the conclusion and my recommendations for further research.

## 1.1 Problem statement

At an early stage of the research it was discovered that different forms of capacity building could be linked to empowerment, which we shall see can be further connected to the work of women's groups in the Ugandan rural communities. Thus, the initial exploratory work with the thesis led to the creation of the following problem statement: "What makes women in rural Central Uganda actively participate in women's groups?". This again led to the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What characterises female community leaders in rural Central Uganda?
RQ2: How are female leaders empowering women in the community?
RQ3: What are the risk factors of actively engaging in women's groups in rural Central Uganda?

The problem statement can apply to both the leaders of the groups and regular members. RQ1 is aimed at leaders, as these are regarded as an extreme user of a women's group, meaning that their motivations can represent the motivations of a wider group of women. RQ2 seeks to reveal how the leaders are strengthening and empowering women in the community and what effect their work in the community has on other females. Finally, RQ3 seeks to investigate what the risk factors are for women when engaging in groups in the community. Additionally, the thesis aims to investigate whether this risk is tied to their gender, culture, context or to the area itself.

To answer these questions, an exploration of the current position of women and female leaders in Uganda is needed.

## 1.2 Delimitations

The research is restricted to a geographical area in Central Uganda, largely because of the fact that this is where we had an existing network of contacts and possible informants. Most of the field research has been conducted in the district of Buikwe. The majority of the data gathering has been done in rural settings, excluding urban centres such as the capital Kampala.

Empowerment is a contested term that could involve different aspects. This thesis will focus on how some females are experiencing empowerment and how this is affecting the surrounding communities. The thesis is in other words mainly concerned with individual empowerment at a local community level, not relational empowerment or collective empowerment. It is restricted to personal empowerment which relates to "developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalised oppression" (Rowlands, 1997, p. 15). Although empowerment is normally used in a wide range of contexts, this research is mainly concerned with female empowerment processes within the context of development. Female empowerment is further regarded as a gender issue, not only a women's issue, class issue or race issue, as female empowerment to a large extent also involves men.

Most people have a perception of gender and share the idea that humans can be put in a range of categories. Traditionally, these categories have been man and woman. The number of categories has however expanded over the last few decades. In the English language, one distinguishes between biological differences (*sex*) and social differences (*gender*) (Aase and Fossåskaret, 2018, p. 147). While the biological differences can be obvious, the social differences are constructed and can be different depending on context, culture and other factors. The implication of this is that a Norwegian person identifying as a woman may attach another set of meanings, expectations, traditions and values to what it means to be a woman than a Ugandan person identifying as a woman. Gender in this thesis will follow the definition provided by UN Women (n.d. c), where gender is regarded as "roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given

society at a given time considers appropriate for men and women". Seeing that the study involves gender dynamics and social differences between genders, this is important to establish.

Turning to the focus on leaders, the research will focus on leaders who are successful in what they do, meaning that they are seeing changes in the community and in women's standing. In this way the thesis is focusing on those who are doing something "right" to be able to learn from this and give advice that can be a contribution to the development sector or further research. The study will not look at women possessing symbolic positions, even though this is a challenge in the African context, as women traditionally have been given positions as assistants to men without any real power or significance (Mutume, 2006, p. 8; Opare, 2005, p. 92). In other words, the focus will be on women who have actually made a difference.

The study has a focus on grassroots women's organisations (Rowlands, 1997, p. 39), which exist independently of unions, associations, NGOs or institutionalised bodies. The women's groups studied varies in form and function. Some groups are small and village based, and may organise skill teaching or micro financing. Other groups are bigger, and may be structured as larger organisations that support women in starting businesses, provide capacity building, offer counselling and so forth.

The terms "community leader" and "female leader" are used interchangeably in the thesis, and it may include, but is not limited to, women who have some kind of responsibility in a village, community, organisation or similar. The responsibility may be formal (i.e. being elected as a chairperson in a village, holding a higher position in an organisation or group, etc.) or informal (i.e. a woman who people admire or visit to seek advice). Further, the thesis will mostly concern female adults, but in relation to some subjects it will be natural to extend this to looking at younger women. This is the case concerning one organisation visited during the field research, that is engaged in capacity building among younger adolescents as well.

With regards to societal safety and risk management, the thesis will focus on risk factors faced by women in the communities that are included in the research. This encompasses both physical and mental risks and will be tied to gender and contextual factors. Identifying these risks can be the first step towards building resilience and preventing crises from occurring in the first place,

as mentioned in the introduction. The study seeks to reveal changes and challenges experienced by leaders and women in the communities and will to a lesser extent go beyond what is said explicitly during interviews (that is, emotional and psychological factors). This relates especially to RQ1 that looks at commonalities between female leaders. There will not be a focus on overarching risks, such as climate risk, as the focus will be on specific risk factors met by the women studied. Further, how one perceives a certain risk (risk perception) is used as a distinct perspective within risk theory when explaining how women understand the risk they are facing because of their behaviour. This will be addressed in the thesis as well.

## 1.3 Previous research

This section will give a brief overview of research that has already been conducted on community leaders in general and community leadership in rural communities in an African context specifically. It will also look at research concerning female empowerment and capacity building.

Brown and Nylander (1998) have done extensive research on community leadership, and found that communities with women in their leadership structure were more viable than similar communities that did not have women represented (p. 74). They further contend that many aspects affect leadership development, not only the mental aspects, such as the personality of a leader, but also sociological structures (p. 86). In the same vein, Evans (2012) claims that community leaders are "agents of change" and people take on leadership roles in communities because they see the need for something to be done (p. 2).

Opare (2005) discusses women's lack of access to effective decision-making opportunities in rural communities in Ghana. The research outlines the potential roles of female community leaders and the reasons for low female representation in decision-making structures. She found that most women in Ghana are so busy with their "exhausting domestic obligations" that they do not have the spare energy to use on public activities or leadership roles (p. 96). She concludes by citing four approaches to enable women to participate in leadership: Increase women's access to

education, boost women's economic power, identify capable leaders and train them and finally, to get communities to assign functional and not only nominal roles to women (pp. 97-98).

Poltera and Schreiner (2019) discuss mainstream leadership theory, feminist leadership theory and the relationship between African values and leadership in Africa. They argue that there is a need for more caution and a conceptual clarity in employing terms such as "women's leadership" and "in the African context" (p. 18). They conclude with a remark about the understanding of "women's leadership in the African context" as an umbrella term, denoting complex challenges associated with the combination of being a woman, a leader and "enacting leadership within particular African contexts" (p. 18).

Concerning female empowerment, Dolan and Scott (2009) found that women who engaged in trading circles experienced more than just an increase in income, but it opened the door to personal and social transformation (p. 215). In all, it served as a mechanism for "poverty reduction and empowerment among poor women in South Africa" (p. 204). Regarding capacity building, Mchunu (2019) shows how participants of a sewing course in South Africa felt self-empowered through the skills they learnt and adds that the project "emphasises the potential of every black woman to become a leader in the community" (p. 65). Additionally, Eger, Miller and Scarles (2018) investigated how capacity building in rural communities can enhance empowerment. The research emphasises the lack of a conceptualisation of the relationship between capacity building and empowerment, and its effect on development. An interesting finding is that capacity building needs an understanding of underlying community dynamics to be effective (p. 207). This aspect will be useful to have in mind when exploring the phenomenon of women's groups.

There is limited research on community leadership in African countries, including Uganda. There is, however, some interesting research on women's groups and female empowerment in South Africa that will be further used to support the findings of this thesis. The literature that has been introduced is relevant as it covers areas of research that are similar to this thesis.

# 2. Context

A brief overview of the Ugandan context will be given in the following section. The facts are meant to situate the reader with some relevant knowledge, while at the same time recognising that the country has a rich history, far too complex for the scope of this thesis. The focus of the following section are some of the historical and political events that have shaped Ugandan society that are useful to know when reading the rest of the thesis.

In his work with coordination in a complex emergency, Kruke (2010) made the distinction between the "inner" and "outer" context of the research. The outer context related to the geographic scope of where the research was conducted, whereas the inner context related to the general response system in a complex emergency; that is, guidelines, standards, responsibilities among the humanitarian actors conducting coordination, and so on (Kruke, 2010, p. 36). The distinction will be useful to apply in this thesis as well, however the concept is employed a bit differently. In this case, the outer context relates to aspects of Uganda such as politics, economy and history. The inner context is tied to organisational structures, individuals' characteristics, responsibilities between group members, statuses, gender dynamics and empowerment within women's groups that might be compared to similar groups elsewhere in the world. This minor adjustment is done to fit the conditions better, as this research is not focused on coordination in a complex emergency. The outer context will be described in this chapter, while the inner context will be further elaborated in later chapters.

## 2.1 Outer context: Uganda

Located in East-Central Africa, Uganda has around 40 million inhabitants (Kokole, Kiwanuka, Ingham, Lyons, 2019). Up until the country was colonised in 1894, Uganda was divided into diverse regions consisting of different tribes. Tribal life was highly communal and influenced by spirituality, which shaped everything from traditions, customs and beliefs (Coughtry, 2011, p. 23). Even in today's Uganda one can see traces of tribal life, as there are still some cultural

groupings that are guided by traditional kings or chiefs "who are not politically elected but have an indirect role in community governance and moral build up" (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016, p. 4). Further evidence of Uganda's history concerning tribes are the different languages spoken across the country, such as Luganda, although its official languages are Swahili and English. Uganda was a colony under Great Britain until 1962. After this, the country went on to become a republic where the elected president has full political power (Kokole et al., 2019). The sitting president is Yoweri Museveni (National Resistance Movement), who seized power in 1986 after a coup. While he promised to restore stability and rebuild the economy, a period of further unrest followed (Ofcansky, 1996, p. 1). Despite being rich in resources, the country has since been through cycles of poverty, disease, crime, instability and refugee migration. The rebel group Lord's Resistance Army terrorised northern parts of Uganda for over 20 years with guerrilla wars, killing civilians, recruiting child soldiers and destroying entire villages (UNAN, 2018). Since 2007 their presence has been minimal and Uganda has in general made significant development progress. Instead of focusing on recovery, today's economy is focusing on growth where economic policies and programs have allowed several communities to flourish and develop (GOU, n.d., p. III). In spite of this, challenges with gender based violence (GBV), early marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) continues (GOU, n.d., p. 97; UNAN, 2018). The unemployment rate is high among all age groups, resulting in many Ugandans with professional skills going abroad if possible (Ofcansky, 1996, p. 2). Uganda is currently the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa with over one million refugees and asylum-seekers (UNICEF, 2020, p. 1).

Some of the current challenges for development identified by the government of Uganda are weak public sector management and administration, ideological disorientation, low industrialisation and slow accumulation of modern infrastructure (GOU, n.d., p. 6). Uganda's infrastructure has improved in the later years, but has been categorised as substandard and a major economic bottleneck (Ofcansky, 1996, p. 2). Corruption remains a considerable challenge at all levels.

According to the latest National Population and Housing Census (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016), Christianity is the largest religious denomination in Uganda, with 40 % of the population indicating being Catholic and 32 % Anglican. Islam is the second biggest religion, with around 14 % indicating that they are Muslim (p. 19). Further, Uganda can be identified as being a conservative culture, where it is expected for women to wear clothes covering their knees and shoulders. This is believed to have been influenced by religion (Coughtry, 2011, p. 55). Having introduced some contextual background, the following section will take a closer look at women's standing in Uganda.

### 2.1.1 Women's position in Uganda

As of January 2019, Uganda had 34 % female representation in parliament, which places them above the average for the proportion of females in parliament in Africa (UNECA, 2019, p. 2). Women played a significant role in the formulation of the 1995 constitution, after funding the Ministry of Women in Development, which implemented women's programmes and worked to make the public aware of women's issues (Kokole et al., 2019). However, Asiimwe (2001) points out that "because women hold a subordinated position in society, issues concerning them tend to appear low on the priority list of legislative business" (p. 185).

As seen in the fact box in figure 1, women are facing positive trends in Uganda. Women hold almost half of the labour market and over 30 % of all leader positions are held by women (compared to 25 % on a worldwide basis (UN Women, 2020, p. 5)). The GII-index of Uganda is around 0.5. The index measures "uneven distribution between sexes when it comes to health, participation and occupation activities" (UNDP, n.d). This places Uganda on the 126th place of the 189 countries being ranked by the GII-index. The scale goes from zero to one, where zero is the best, suggesting that Uganda still has a way to go when it comes to equality. The literacy rate for females is at 70 % (The World Bank, n.d.). Nevertheless, being a young Ugandan woman on the work market poses more challenges than it does for males, such as higher unemployment rates, wage gaps and higher prevalence of temporary contracts (Ahaibwe and Ntale, 2016). Generally speaking, African women have been subjected to high levels of discrimination,

socio-economic and political exclusion, GBV and limited access to education (CARE, 2016; Poltera and Schreiner, 2019, p. 16).



**LABOR MARKET**
Of the total labor market in Uganda, 49 % are women. (UNAN, n.d.b).

**49 %**

**FEMALE LEADERS**
Almost 32 % of all leader positions are held by women (UNAN, n.d.a).

**32 %**

**GII**
Distribution between sexes when it comes to health, participation and occupational activities. (UNDP, n.d.).

**0.531 ⋆**

**LITERACY RATE**
70 % of all females above 15 are literate (The World Bank, n.d.).

**70 %**

⋆Goes from 0 to 1, where 0 is the best

Figure 1: Fact box, women in Uganda. Sources: UNAN, UNDP, The World Bank. Figure is the author's own work, 2020.

To understand how women are being empowered it will be important to shed light on women's standing in Ugandan culture and gender dynamics in general. In spite of legal rights and policies, gender inequality persists in Uganda. This is seen in, for example, the gender disparities in access and control over land; the limited share of women employed in non-agricultural sectors; the persistence of sexual and gender-based violence and the limited participation in household, community and national decision-making (GOU, n.d., p. 96). Uganda is a patriarchal society, ranging from rural areas with traditional customs, to more urban areas where the influence from other cultures is seen to a bigger extent. One's role in the family and household is greatly designated by one's gender (Coughtry, 2011, p. 55). Women, especially in rural areas, are responsible for the unpaid work at home, which includes cooking, fetching firewood, fetching water and taking care of the children. Men are on the other hand responsible for the paid work. A study carried out by Rarick, Winter, Nickerson, Falk, Barczyk and Asea (2013) found that Uganda is a masculine, collectivist culture that is relatively high in uncertainty avoidance and

where people have a short-term orientation towards time (p. 8). Similarly, Asiimwe (2001) found that "In traditional African society, the individual is not autonomous, nor does she possess rights above and beyond those of the rest of society" (p. 187). Further, the same article highlights how the focus in some African societies is on a female's duties and obligations, rather than her rights and individual advancement. These factors are included in the thesis as they are important to understand the difficulties one faces when taking responsibility in one's community or engaging in a women's group.

# 3. Theoretical framework

The aim of this chapter is to unpack and explain some useful definitions and the theoretical background for the research. Firstly, theories concerning female empowerment will be addressed. Jo Rowlands' (1997) work concerning women in Honduras will to a large extent be employed throughout the study, in addition to other contributions. Her work is both a presentation of her case studies and her theory development concerning female empowerment. Her cases have some similarities with the communities visited in relation to this research. In both Uganda and Honduras there is a gap between nominal rights and actual rights for women, health is a major issue in both cases and the unemployment rate is high in both countries. Secondly, different perspectives on risk and risk perception will be addressed, where Renn (2008) is the main contributor and is supported by, among others, Aven (2006).

## 3.1 Female empowerment

Theories concerning empowerment can be traced back to educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's work from 1973, and its modern use can be tied to sociology, psychology, economy and political science among other areas (Hur, 2006, p. 524). Approaches to development that include writings on empowerment and gender have emerged in the literature since the 1970's (Parpart, Rai and Staudt, 2003, pp. 48-49). Although female empowerment is the focus of this thesis, the term has been used within different aspects of social identities besides gender, including race, disability and for people living in poverty (Rowlands, 1997, p. 3; Sida, 2010, p. 11). Firstly, to understand and use the term female empowerment precisely in this thesis, power dynamics between genders will be addressed.

Both Rowlands (1997) and Parpart et al. (2003) recognise distinct forms of power when writing about empowerment: "power over", "power to", "power with" and "power from within". The first can be understood as the most conventional way of thinking about power, where the term includes having power over something or someone. In this sense, if women gain power it will be at men's expense, as power in Uganda (as in most of the world) is wielded predominantly by

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men over other men or women. Following this argument, a woman being empowered can be intimidating as she will not only gain power but also be able to exercise power over the man (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13). Rowlands further argues that a woman's response to "power over" is often submission or resistance (1997, p. 83). The second form of power, "power to", is a generative form of power, where power leads one to be productive or create new possibilities (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13). This can be tied to the work of different women's groups, where for example a group working within capacity building can lead to more women being able to obtain jobs and thereby bring about change in their lives or community. The third form, "power with", also includes a group feeling where one has a politicised power with others (Parpart et al., 2003, p. 35), meaning a group can tackle problems together rather than individually. Lastly, "power from within", is a strength within or an individual conscientisation, that is based on self-acceptance and self-respect (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13; Parpart et al., 2003, p. 35). These different distinctions will be useful when assessing the extent of empowerment within the communities studied in this thesis, as well as in the discussion.

Returning to female empowerment, many definitions point to a process where one gains power over decisions and resources (Sida, 2010, p. 29; Empowerment, n.d.; UN Women, n.d. b). According to UN Women's Gender Equality Glossary (n.d. b) this can involve "awareness-raising, building self-confidence, expansion of choices, increased access to and control over resources and actions to transform the structures and institutions which reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality". This can be seen as a conventional way of defining power and empowerment, where individuals are empowered when they are brought into the decision-making processes and maximise the opportunities available to them (previously defined as "power over"). Rowlands (1997) argues that empowerment is more than this, and it must include "the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions. (...) Empowerment must involve undoing negative social constructions, so that people come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and influence decisions" (p. 14). Core aspects in the process of being empowered are an increase of self-confidence and self-esteem, a sense of agency and a sense of being worthy (Rowlands, 1997, p. 130). This means that female empowerment includes gaining self-awareness and understanding one's

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situation in order to change the current situation. In other words, it is not sufficient for a woman to, for example, gain specific skills, it is the psycho-social process around the change in self-perception that is the key to her empowerment (Rowlands, 1997, p. 111). This also entails empowerment being both a fluid process and a measurable outcome (Parpart et al., 2003, p. 36). To illustrate, a woman who gains new skills can expect a widening of economic choices, which can lead to a woman becoming economically independent, which again can lead to some of the core values of empowerment.

According to Rowlands (1997, p. 113) there are several factors that must be in place to encourage changes that can lead to personal empowerment. Engaging in activities outside the home, being part of something bigger, getting support, expressing personal issues and developing literacy skills are some of the factors that can facilitate changes towards female empowerment. The changes can be, among other things, increased ability to compose ideas, to master new skills, increased ability to interact outside the home and an increased sense that things are possible. Also, participating in a women's group can enable a woman to later be part of a group where both genders meet as she builds up confidence (Rowlands, 1997, p. 96). These are all factors that can be seen in relation to an active engagement in women's groups.

On the other side, there are factors that can inhibit a woman's empowerment. Not seeing the situation one is in, or having a fatalistic look on it, can be seen as an obstacle to female empowerment (Rowlands, 1997, p. 114). Other obstacles include health issues (including lack of control over one's fertility), fatalism, active opposition by a partner and lack of control over one's use of time (Rowlands, 1997, p. 112). Rowlands (1997) also points at the fact that learning new skills or actively engaging in a group can actually lead to a heavier workload: "A woman may become personally empowered in many ways, including becoming able to earn her own living. However, if she continues to carry the full responsibility for domestic duties, including child-care, at the same time, her 'empowerment' has actually increased her burden" (p. 132). Additionally, in the patriarchal, culturally conservative Ugandan context, women face challenges as leaders due to historical disempowerment, oppression and discrimination (Poltera and

Schreiner, 2019, pp. 15-16). Including obstacles for female empowerment in this thesis will give a broader perspective when analysing findings from the field research.

A final remark before turning to perspectives on risk, is that women's groups can act as a vehicle for personal empowerment (Rowlands, 1997, p. 84). Depending on the context, there are some components that can be of importance when it comes to the success of women's groups, and thereby enabling the process of empowerment. Examples of this are a significant individual, external support or the philosophy of the group. A significant individual can be characterised by three things: being a local woman, her skills and experience and her commitment (Rowlands, 1997, p. 90). These will be useful components to have in mind when discussing the empowerment of women in the communities studied and to determine the success of a women's group.

## 3.2 Perspectives on risk

Despite its common usage, the term *risk* is used within different disciplines to mean different things. One aspect of risk is risk perception, which will be dealt with shortly, however the main focus of this thesis revolves around risk. Many definitions are overlapping, nonetheless most of them have in common that they involve the relationship between possible actions and chosen actions. Risk points to something that can happen or could have happened, and it can refer to all the aspects of how people experience dangers or hazards they are facing, and the acceptable behaviour in relation to this (Aven, Boyesen, Njå, Olsen and Sandve, 2013, p. 40). Risk is a combination of possible consequences and the uncertainty that is tied to these consequences (Aven, 2006, p. 41). Risk in this sense does not point to specific consequences, as it in this thesis will be more relevant to see who is affected and to what degree. Another commonality in the literature on risk is the acknowledgment that risk is socially and culturally constructed, and there is a subjective context that has an impact on how individuals understand and handle risk (Aven, 2006, p. 56). This is highly connected to societal perspectives on risk, which engages in questions on how risk is perceived, how it is understood and how one collects knowledge about

risk (Engen, Kruke, Lindøe, Olsen, Olsen and Pettersen, 2016, p. 90). This view will be upheld throughout the thesis.

One aspect that can determine how individuals experience risk is risk perception. Risk perception is based on individuals' cognitive properties, experiences, judgements, traditions and values, thereby isolating it in a personal perception of reality (Engen et al., 2016, p. 82; Renn, 2008, p. 94). From this point of view, how one experiences risk can be determined by societal and cultural factors, in line with the previously stated societal perspectives on risk. Renn (2008) observes a commonality in the risk literature that points to the understanding of risk and how it can refer to a "multidimensional concept that cannot be reduced to the product of probabilities and consequences" (p. 21). He further contends that most people form their beliefs on the basis of the nature of the risk, the cause of the risk and the associated benefits, even though risk perceptions differ among social and cultural groups. Similarly, Sjöberg (2006, p. 694) argues that individuals respond to a hazard or risk item according to their own perception of risk and not in agreement with risk analysis. A mundane example of this is individuals being afraid of flying even though there is a higher possibility of accident or injury while driving a car. Another factor for risk perception relevant to this thesis are traditional knowledge systems and deeply rooted beliefs that pose a fatalistic vision of the future (UNISDR, 2006, p. 10). This can be tied to traditions, customs and beliefs in the Ugandan society and religion.

Renn (2008) presents eight contextual factors of risks that have been found to affect people's judgements about risks (p. 106). The factors are related to the risk itself, whereas risk perception is an individual interpretation of the risk. One of these is *situation-related characteristics*, which is connected to the situation where the risk manifests itself (Renn, 2008, p. 106). Being under the impression that a risk can be controlled or being exposed to it voluntarily and given personal control, leads an individual to perceive the risk as less serious. Following the example from above, an individual may perceive the risk of driving as less serious if she is the one behind the steering wheel. This comprises a trade-off where engaging in activities that pose a risk might be worth engaging in if the outcome has the potential to be positive. Put differently, having personal control over the choice or the risk one is taking can increase the risk tolerance. A female

Ugandan engaging in a microfinancing programme may, for example, take a risk if she is lacking consent from her husband. On the other hand, it can lead to new opportunities and an improved life situation. This suggests that the risk is worth taking for her. This also suggests that risk can represent something positive. Aven (2006) maintains that although many of the contributions within the literature deal with risk as something negative and as a threat, it can also be looked upon as something positive and necessary to achieve certain things (p. 38). It is therefore of importance to find the acceptable amount of risk one is willing to take and find a balance between different considerations (p. 28).

A second contextual factor is *beliefs associated with the cause of risk* (Renn, 2008, p. 108), which relates to the attitude a person possesses towards the cause of a risk that can further be tied to the perception of that risk. To avoid emotional stress caused by conflicting beliefs, humans "are inclined to perceive risks as more serious and threatening if other beliefs contain negative connotations" (Renn, 2008, p. 108). This is exemplified by women facing a heavy workload (i.e. combining engagement in a digging group and responsibilities in the home) who are comfortable with facing this physical risk of a heavy workload as long as they truly believe it is their responsibility because of the cultural traditions in the community. In relevance to this, it is worth indicating the significance of values and cultural background as a determinant of subjective risk (Renn, 2008, p. 118), as the field research was conducted in an unfamiliar context.

A third factor that may affect one's risk perception is *personal involvement*. If a person is practically or emotionally involved in the risk-causing activity, they have a more positive perception of risk connected to this activity (Renn, 2008, p. 109). Related to this thesis' context, an example would be a female leader being involved in a group to that extent that she is not worried about the discrimination or reprisals that she might face from male community members.

The remaining five contextual factors formulated by Renn (2008), have been omitted as their relevance for the topic of this thesis has been considered to be minimal. The presented factors, situation-related characteristics, beliefs associated with the cause of risk and personal involvement, will be used in the discussion to characterise the risks women engaging in groups are facing.

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, managing and analysing risk is a requisite for sustainable development. When managing and analysing risk, it is of importance to be aware of what humans value and events that can have a negative impact on those values. Furthermore, it is significant to know how susceptible humans are to harmful events and what capacity one has to protect one's values (Becker, 2014, p. 136). Becker further contends that when managing risk for sustainable development, it is important to not only look at the sudden and dramatic risk scenarios (for example, flooding or landslides), but to also include the scenarios that are "gradual and mundane" (2014, p. 139). In relation to this thesis, these could entail the prevalence of unemployment, heavy workload over longer periods of time, long distances to health facilities and so forth. These are viewed as factors that make a population vulnerable. In this respect, by reducing the vulnerability within a population, there is a great potential to reduce risk for sustainable development (Becker, 2014, p. 141). These will be important perspectives to bear in mind when we reach the discussion concerning risk factors of engaging in women's groups.

## 3.3 Theoretical summary

This chapter has provided the theoretical framework that will be used throughout the thesis and eventually to answer the problem statement and the research questions. The definitions and factors outlined for female empowerment will be used to identify how female leaders are empowering females in the community, as stated in the research questions. There are different ways of understanding power, therefore the reader has been presented with some definitions that will be used during the discussion. Power dynamics between genders involve complex mechanisms, and the scope of the thesis does not allow for an extensive exploration of the nuances. To narrow the area of focus, it has been important with a clear delimitation of the concepts.

The perspectives given on risk will be used when identifying what risk factors Ugandan women are facing when engaging in women's groups. Risk is seen in the light of individual properties, experiences, judgements, traditions, values and perception. This entails an understanding of the context and the informants' subjective experiences with risk, meaning that this work could not

have been done without conducting the field research. Thus, risk is both dependent on what is being assessed and on the individual who is assessing (Aven et al., 2013, p. 37). The theories and definitions presented in this chapter will be used as a tool in the discussion when analysing and characterising underlying mechanisms for engagement in women's groups and risk factors that are faced. The next chapter deals with the methodology of the thesis.

# 4. Methodology

This chapter presents the methods that I have used throughout the study. The research process has been divided into three main phases, as illustrated in figure 2. The figure also illustrates the overlapping nature of the research process. Prior to giving a detailed description of the methods used in the research and reviewing the quality of it, a brief account of the process will be given. This will be followed by a description of the objectives and strategies behind the research.

**EXPLORATION**
Research theories, get overview and understanding

**COLLECTION**
Document analysis, field research

**ANALYSIS**
Reduce, analyse, explain, discuss.
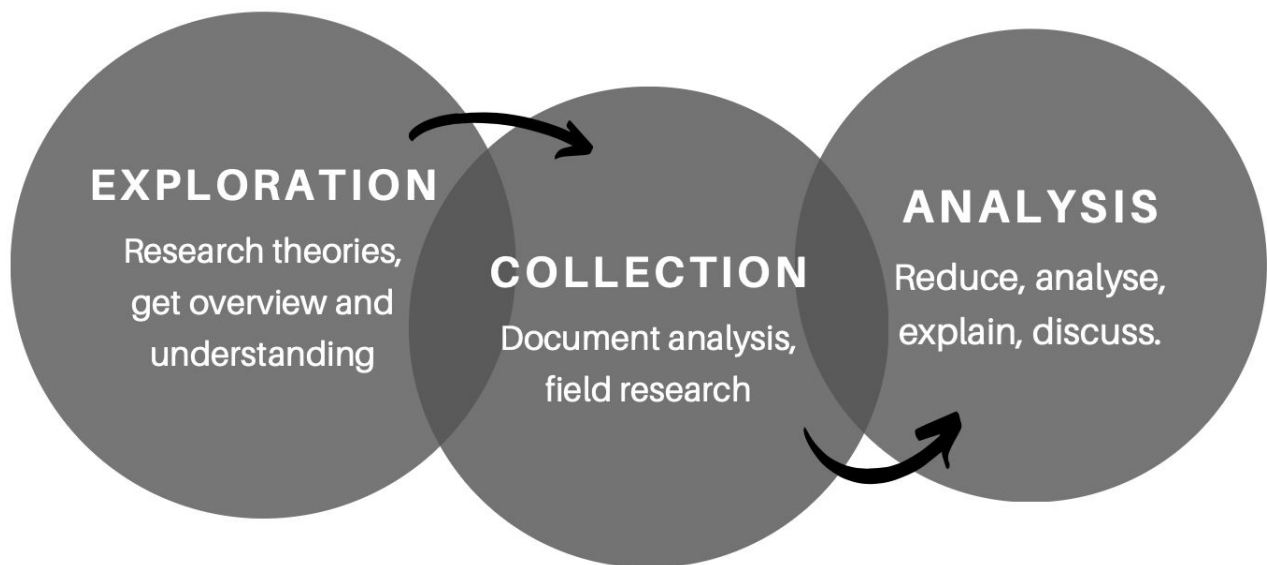
Figure 2: Main phases of the research. Author's own work, 2020.

## 4.1 Research process

The research started with an exploratory phase that involved a short review of existing literature as well as basic research of Uganda in general. Conducting field work in an unfamiliar country requires some preparation. A large amount of research was conducted before going to Uganda, to have the best prerequisite to understand as much as possible concerning the context and culture when arriving. The aim of this phase was to achieve an overview of the state of affairs, and to get an understanding of how the context could be researched (Blaikie, 2008, p. 73). This was essential to obtain broader knowledge of the research topics and the context, but also to facilitate the field research and to ensure a sense of confidence when arriving. This also included parts of

the document analysis (see chapter 4.3.1) and to study literature concerning African and Ugandan history, culture and geography (particularly Skard, 2001, and Balsvik, 2004). Following the exploratory phase, a set of research questions was developed and the continuing research was guided by these.

The next phase was the data collection, which in most part was done during the field research. The choice of destination for the field research was based on three reasons: First, as the scope and time constraint of the research project did not allow me to do an extensive anthropological study, I had to choose a location that was possible to reach and that had a context that was possible to research. Therefore, areas of conflict or areas that are considered dangerous for visitors or researchers were out of the question. The field research was undertaken with a fellow student, who had some experience with travelling within various African countries. The explorative research and my fellow student's knowledge of the area gave me the impression that Uganda is a rather peaceful, open and welcoming country. Second, Uganda's positive development concerning women in politics and business made the country stand out as an interesting location and case with regards to the themes of the thesis. Third, my fellow student's existing contacts in the area made Uganda seem like a feasible location to conduct the research.

The final phase of the study included the data reduction and analysis. The research questions and the problem statement have evolved following the field work. In the preliminary phases of the work, women's groups were not a part of the study, but seeing the role these groups played for many women during my field work, it became obvious that this had to be included. Blaikie (2008) acknowledges that qualitative research methods involve the researcher in a learning process where the research questions may develop during the research process (p. 64). The following table provides a timeline of the research process.

| When | Activity | Purpose | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|
| September - December, 2019 | Attended thesis seminar and delivered a project draft. | To start the process as early as possible and decide what was desirable and possible for the thesis. | First project draft and the direction for the thesis was carved out. Decided to go abroad for the field research. |
| September - February, 2019 | Studied several reports, articles, dissertations. | To find relevant research, to become familiar with definitions and concepts (e.g. empowerment, community leadership, Uganda in general, etc.). | Achieved an overview of relevant research and relevant data. The field of investigation was narrowed down. |
| Beginning of January, 2020 | Wrote the first draft of introduction, problem statement and research questions. Dug deeper into theories. | The purpose was to concretise ideas, explore how the research could be conducted, find relevant sources of data and theory. | First draft and overview of relevant theories. |
| End of January, 2020 | Researched plausible destinations for field trip. Contacted relevant organisations and projects. | To choose a destination with an appropriate context for my research. To find relevant informants and schedule meetings. | Received contact information and started to set concrete appointments with informants. Researching organisations led to a further narrowing of the scope of the thesis. |
| January - February, 2020 | Conducted the first part of the document analysis. Developed the interview guide and questionnaire. | To achieve an overview of written sources that could back up or refute findings from interviews. Also to further concretise what the research should focus on. | A better insight and understanding of the Ugandan context and issues women face in Uganda. |
| 24th of February - 16th of March, 2020 | Field work in Buikwe district, Uganda. Transcribed interviews and noted initial impressions and observations. | Data collection. | Obtained data from interviews and observations. |
| March, 2020 | Returned on the 16th of March. Presented tentative findings to my supervisor and other professors. Analysed findings. | The purpose of the presentation was to sort, analyse and achieve an overview of the data and receive feedback on initial findings. | Tables and overviews of what data had been collected. The problem statement was tweaked and adjusted to some of the findings. |

| March - April, 2020 | The second part of the document analysis was conducted. The theoretical framework was adjusted according to changes in the problem statement. The data material was concretised and connected in the empirical section. | To see if there were overlaps or contradictions between documents and the field research. To tie together theory, findings, empirical material. | The thesis had a clear structure. |
|---|---|---|---|
| April - May, 2020 | The findings were further analysed and the discussion was written. Parts of the thesis were adjusted and refined. | The purpose was to make the adjustments and clarifications in good time before the deadline. | The major parts of the thesis were completed. |
| End of May - June, 2020 | Finalised the conclusion, made minor adjustments, reviewed the literature list, and proofread the thesis. | Ensure a high quality of the thesis and a clear language. | The thesis was finalised and submitted on the 15th of June. |

Table 1: Research process. Author's own work, 2020.

## 4.2 Research objectives and strategies

Different types of empirical research has been conducted to be able to answer the problem statement and research questions. Methods include various forms of interviews and observations. The research questions were formulated in a matter that made it possible to investigate different aspects concerning female leaders and female empowerment in rural Uganda. The objective of the problem statement is to explore and describe the phenomenon of engagement in women's groups and to give an account of why this particular incident seems to occur in the given context. The research questions aim at exploring how this can be linked to empowerment, and which risk factors one faces when engaging in women's groups. The research questions let me analyse commonalities between female leaders and how leaders are bringing about change in women's lives. Blaikie (2008) argues that formulating questions as "what" and "how" questions facilitates discovery, description and the highlighting of processes and change (pp. 60-61). Additionally, the study conducted in this thesis investigates how women perceive themselves and the risk factors they are facing when actively engaging in women's groups. Commonalities in the

answers let me produce generalisations concerning the phenomenon. This corresponds with the characteristics of an inductive strategy, where it is necessary to see similarities and patterns in the data obtained to produce generalisations (Blaikie, 2008, p. 103; Danermark, 2002, p. 80).

The patterns can further be used to make assumptions about a larger group or population, in other words to answer the research questions and thus the problem statement. The research questions seek to investigate how leaders are bringing about a change in women's lives. This especially relates to RQ2, as it assumes that empowerment is already occurring, thereby implying that it is a process or a transformation. As female empowerment is closely related to power structures, it entails that the research question seeks to reveal gender dynamics or power structures that exist and that these can be seen as either a bridge or an obstacle to achieve female empowerment in this context. There is an assumption that the social phenomena and mechanisms that are revealed exist independently of the researcher and the social actors, which implies the use of a retroductive strategy. That being said, it is of importance to be aware of the fact that the social actors may have little or no awareness of the power structures that are being researched (Blaikie, 2008, pp. 111-112). This has been taken into consideration when developing the interview guides, making sure that the questions did not suggest underlying mechanisms or that the questions were not leading in any way.

By combining the inductive strategy with the retroductive strategy, it has been possible to reach the overall goal for the thesis, which is to explore and describe engagement in women's groups with reference to underlying power structures and gender dynamics. This is part of a realist ontology, where the objects of research (in this case empowerment, gender dynamics and risk) exist independently of me as a researcher (Blaikie, 2008, p. 108). Applying a realist ontology entails describing the patterns or regularities that exist in the research objects, because this determines social behaviour (Blaikie, 2008, p. 119). In other words, the thesis does not aim at estimating *why* women are engaging in groups or *why* leaders are empowering women, but it can provide descriptions and patterns concerning these events.

When gathering the data, I have been affected by my views of the world. This has influenced what I see as relevant, but seeing that I am aware of it, it also lets me present and describe how

the informants are viewing the world and their social reality. I am looking at the phenomenon of women's groups from the outside and explaining it is one step towards understanding it. This is part of the "task of science", as Danermark (2002) puts it, "to reach beyond the purely empirical assertion of a certain phenomenon, to a description of what it was in the object that made it possible" (p. 58). Towards the end of this thesis, I am in other words going to describe what makes women in rural Central Uganda engage in women's groups.

Epistemology can be explained as how we choose to gain knowledge about the world. The knowledge and data needed to provide the aforementioned descriptions and patterns, can in this case be obtained through observations, but it is also affected by cultural filters and individual mental processes (Engen et al., 2016, p. 90). This is useful when discussing risk as socially and culturally constructed, which entails the application of a constructionist epistemology. In this respect, I have attempted as best I can to be aware of preconceptions I had about Ugandan culture and society and tried to put them aside during interviews. This is because my view on risks would be different than a Ugandan woman's view on the same kind of risks. Additionally, the choice of theories have determined what sort of data that has been collected, which is the subject of the next section.

## 4.3 Data collection
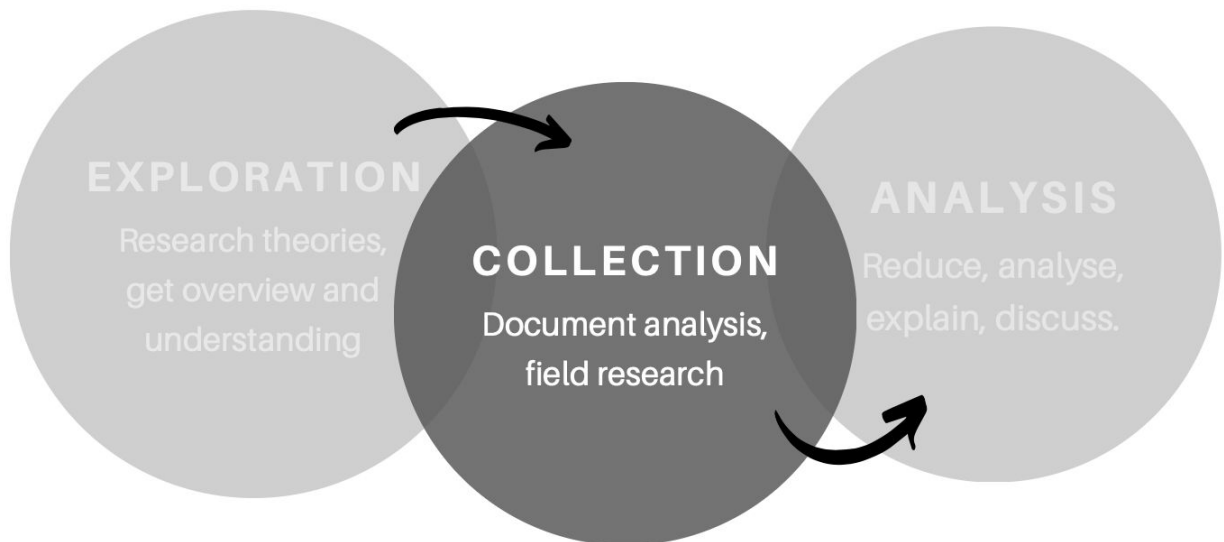


Figure 3: Main phases of the research: Collection. Author's own work, 2020.

For the most part, qualitative methods have been used in the study. This has been conducted through interviews, questionnaires, observations and a document analysis. Even though the questionnaires for the most part included qualitative questions (open-ended questions that required longer answers), it had some quantitative elements. The quantitative questions were included to give a broader understanding of women's standing in Uganda and specifically in the communities visited. By combining qualitative in-depth interviews with questionnaires, I have reached a better insight into the respondents' points of view. This is supported by Danermark (2002), who argues that quantitative methods can be used when discovering social actors' "socially constructed reality and penetrating the frames of meaning within which they conduct their activities" (p. 251). The data gathering for the questionnaires was organised as visits to two villages, where informants answered a questionnaire with the help from an interpreter. Seven in-depth interviews were also conducted in relation to these visits in the villages. The other in-depth interviews were conducted at different locations.

Primary data in this thesis includes the interviews and observations. Secondary and tertiary data includes some of the data retrieved from the document analysis, like Nykvist (2016). This report

contains both raw data and data that has already been analysed. This has been a valuable report for the purposes of this thesis, considering that it involves the same villages visited during the field work. The next section will look into how the report and other documents were found and analysed.

Unfortunately, the worldwide outbreak of covid-19 led to travel restrictions and we were forced to interrupt the field work 12 days earlier than planned. This made it necessary to cancel some interviews, chiefly interviews planned with male leaders or men with a certain responsibility in communities. It also means that I did not get the opportunity to revisit some of the informants to confirm the data. Despite this, I still believe the data gathered during the field research is of quantity and quality high enough to provide a solid and reliable basis for answering my research questions.

## 4.3.1 Document analysis

Different parts of the document analysis have been performed at different stages of the research. In the exploratory phase of the project it was important to get an overview over the state of affairs concerning both the theoretical approach and the context. To get an overview, a comprehensive amount of research was done to gather information about existing research and reports from Uganda and similar contexts. This was done through the university library's resource sites and using a regular search engine. Different combinations of words were used, e.g. "female, empowerment, Uganda", "gender, empowerment, development", "risk, development, gender" and similar. Additionally, relevant master's theses within the field of societal safety and risk management were studied to look for appropriate resources and references. This especially included theses where parts of the data gathering was done through field research, as the process and approach there is different than in for example a case study of one's home country. This is how the main literature for the theories concerning female empowerment and risk was found.

The next phase of the document analysis was done after the field research. When analysing the relevant documents in the first phase, the normative premises for female empowerment and different perspectives on risk were discovered. This gave a good starting point when revealing

which processes that needed further exploration in the field, and which decisions needed to be made concerning the interview guide. Through the interviews and observations, the normative premises from the document analysis were challenged when exploring how these structures function in reality. To give an example, reading about the value and success of some women's groups is better understood when visiting them and seeing how they are a big part of many women's lives. Thus, when returning from the field research, it was necessary to review the documents to see if there were overlaps or contradictions. The documents have been chosen on the basis of their credibility (concerning author, publisher, content, etc.) and their relevance for the research. They have been analysed and read several times during the research process. Documents relevant for background and context have been skimmed whereas documents for theory development have been read more thoroughly. A part of the analysis has been to write short summaries of why the documents are relevant for my research and in what part of the thesis they could be used. Appendix B gives an overview over the most relevant documents that have been studied, a total of 22 documents.

It has been a challenge to find documents with relevant data from Uganda, and specifically the areas where the data gathering was performed. Nykvist (2016) provides research from the same villages we visited, whereas GOU (n.d.) provide facts concerning statistics and policies regarding development in Uganda. Mullinax, Higgins, Wagman, Nakyyanjo, Kigozi, Serwadda, Wawer, Gray and Nalugoda (2013) provide some insight into Ugandans' perception of gender equality and empowerment. Documents from other parts of Africa have also been used to support the literature. Literature on women's groups in a developmental context or in relation to female empowerment is also scarce, where Dolan and Scott (2009) provide an exception. This largely explains how the documents have been gathered and analysed, and the next sections will look into the more active parts of the data gathering.

### 4.3.2 Interviews and questionnaires

Most of the interviews and observations for this thesis have been conducted in and around the district of Buikwe, Uganda, in the period from the 25th of February to the 16th of March, 2020. This part of the data gathering was separated into two main parts: In-depth interviews and

questionnaires. Before going into the details around the interviews, a brief explanation of the planning and logistics concerning the data gathering will be given.

Some organisations and potential informants were contacted by email in the weeks before arriving in Uganda, and four of the interviews were scheduled through this correspondence. Two of these were cancelled due to logistics from the interviewees side, however, one of these informants answered questions through email correspondence. Nonetheless, contact with most of the interviewees was obtained through new acquaintances we made on arrival and the so-called snowball method (Blaikie, 2008, p. 205). Since my fellow student had already been to the area before, she had some contacts that were of help. One of them was a social worker with work experience from the communities visited. He also functioned as our interpreter, as he had previous experience with this kind of research.

The social worker facilitated a visit to two villages and set up meetings with the local leaders in order to obtain permission to conduct the research. He also organised seven interviews with female leaders from women's groups in these villages. The villages are referred to as village A and B, where village A has approximately 65 households and village B has approximately 700 households. The visits served as observation, but it was also part of my fellow student's data gathering regarding water issues. In her questionnaire, I included four questions regarding women's standing in the communities (see appendix D). The questionnaires were answered by both women and men, depending on availability. The social worker translated, and it was organised by going door-to-door. This was done to get a general impression of women's standing in the communities. As village B was considerably bigger than village A, the sample size was spread over a bigger area to get answers from different parts of the village.

12 longer interviews have been conducted, varying from 10 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the context (see table 2). As mentioned, one interview has been conducted through email correspondence. As mentioned, seven of the interviews were held in relation to the visit in the villages. The informants were all female leaders or women with a certain responsibility in a women's group, for example as a security officer or the person responsible for women's affairs in a village. Some of the interviews were semi-structured in-depth interviews, whereas others

were more in the form of structured conversations. Two of the conversations had two or more attendants. It would have been nearly impossible to make appointments with the informants in advance, as few of them had any means of being contacted besides showing up in person. Therefore, the interviews held in connection with the visits in the villages were by random selection in the sense that I did not know beforehand if the informant was available or not. In a situation where it is impossible to identify a specific population for the data gathering, this method, identified as judgemental or purposive sampling, can be used (Blaikie, 2008, p. 205). The rest of the in-depth interviews, a total of four, were not sampled in the same manner as they were planned in advance and the females were selected because they had been identified as being either successful or well respected within their community. For instance, one informant had been pointed out by a local priest that we met during our stay. Needless to say, several informal conversations were held throughout the field trip, where new perspectives arose. The most relevant of these are included in table 2.

An interview guide was prepared in advance, with some adjustments along the way. The original interview guide was too long and required too much time, therefore the guide was adjusted to reflect the pace and environment where the interviews were held (see appendix C). The shorter interviews were held on the village tours and sometimes in an abrupt manner, for instance when the interviewee was preparing food or washing clothes. In these situations the interviews were kept shorter. In hindsight, a shorter guide should have been prepared, perhaps in the form of a questionnaire. Nevertheless, the interview guide kept its original structure and was organised in the same order as the RQs. The questions served as a guideline through the interview, making sure all themes were covered. Leading questions were avoided by formulating open-ended questions. The most central issue for the interviews was to gather the women's views and experiences concerning Ugandan society and culture, as well as their perspectives on risk factors they are facing. The interviews were mostly held outside (in front of people's houses and in gardens), except for two of the longer interviews that were held in offices. Sometimes there were several people from the household present, which may have affected the answers, especially if

the husband was present. The following table gives an overview of the informants and what kind of data that has been gathered.

| Interviewee | What kind of interview | For what purpose | Amount | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Local female community leaders. | Semi-structured interviews. | To get relevant data for RQ 1, 2 and 3. | 11 | Dataset used for analysis |
| Representative from an organisation working with female issues. | Questionnaire over email. | To get relevant data for RQ 2 and 3. To see how organisations work to empower women and if they see the desired results. | 1 | Dataset used for analysis |
| Rural women and men. | Questionnaire. | To explore women's standing in the community and what risks they meet (RQ3), from the perspective of both women and men. | 41 | Dataset used for analysis |
| Local council chairmen ("chiefs") from the communities visited. | Conversations. | To get an additional perspective on the communities. To get permission to conduct research. | 2 | Insight on the villages and the context where the research was conducted. |
| Foreign aid worker, local priest, chauffeur, social worker. | Conversations. | To get an understanding of challenges that might arise for a foreign researcher, having an "external" view and coming from the outside. The local priest, the chauffeur and the social worker were people who we came across on several occasions, and they spoke freely about Ugandan society, culture and customs. | 4 | Insight on the Ugandan aid system, the government in general and challenges. Insight on daily life and culture. |

Table 2: Different types of interviews and their outcome. Author's own work, 2020.

### 4.3.3 Field research and observations

It was an advantage to use a combination of methods for the data gathering in the villages, as different points and perspectives arose. The observations done in addition to the interviews were helpful to get a broader and more complete overview of the context. In relation to this, it is of importance to emphasise that this part of the data gathering was done as a cooperation between my fellow student and myself. During the data gathering in the villages we worked as a team, one person asking questions and filling out the questionnaire and the other taking notes on the observations. It was not suitable to use a voice recorder in this situation, as it would have been challenging to obtain permissions during the visit. By the end of each day in the field we discussed the findings and made notes about our observations. This structured the data gathering and also let us discuss the findings along the way, making sure we had the same understanding of the observations, the surroundings and the context. The observations have in other words been very valuable.

For three weeks we were part of a social world different from our own. We engaged in activities in the community, for instance teaching lessons in the nursery, attending a meeting at a primary school about sexual harassment and attending church service. People stopped us in the street for conversations and stopped by the house to greet us. All of these activities contributed to my discovery of the social actors' world views, allowing me to receive answers to questions I never thought to ask and to help me shape a deeper understanding of the culture (Blaikie, 2008, p. 242; Aase and Fossåskaret, 2018, p. 32). In other words, these activities have greatly benefitted the data collection, leaving me with a more complete impression of the culture, customs and everyday life in rural Uganda.

Having described the collection phase of the research, the next section will address the methods used for the final phase of the research: The analysis.

## 4.4 Data reduction and analysis
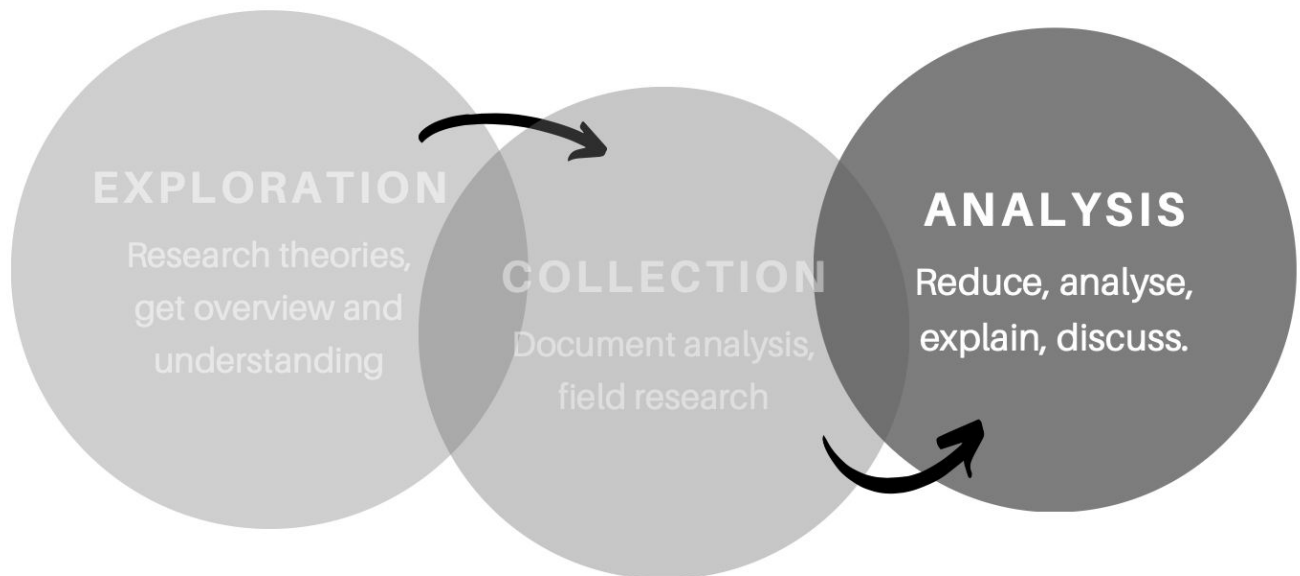


Figure 4: Main phases of the research process: Analysis. Author's own work, 2020.

The findings from the data gathering have been reduced during several processes and iterations. It was necessary to do it several times not only because of the amount of data, but because of the content and the context it was gathered in. The first round of data reduction found place during, and immediately after returning from, the field trip. The questions from the interview guide were placed in a spreadsheet and all answers were typed in. Recurrent answers from the interviews were grouped together with the number of respondents in parentheses. In this way, all the data was gathered in one place, and it was easy to get an overview, to see recurring themes and to see commonalities between the informants. This also allowed me to start writing brief explanations and summaries of obvious findings that needed to be recorded. This can be described as "thin" observations where I was only stating facts and describing the observations (Blaikie, 2008, p. 249). As the data gathering was conducted in an unknown context, where poverty, malnourishment and inequality was observed daily, it was important for me to let the data rest for some time. In this way, I was able to be more detached and objective when analysing and describing the data.

The next round of reduction included breaking all the interviews apart and putting the parts together to form new meanings, make new connections and group them in relevant themes that had not been clear before. The first step was to note insights, quotes and themes from all of the interviews on post-its and stick them under the suitable research question (see appendix E). The next step was to group together post-its that were similar or that in some way belonged together. The last step was to import the findings into a spreadsheet and find suitable themes. For instance, the themes for RQ1 were personality and traits, motivations and cultural factors. This can be characterised as "thick" descriptions, as it includes context, the possible intentions of the social actors and the processes where the social action is taking place (Blaikie, 2008, p. 240). This is where data reduction overlaps with analysis, and it is hard to keep them separated as they blend in a cyclical process (Blaikie, 2008, p. 236). Raw data from the questionnaires were put in spreadsheets and, when relevant, percentages were calculated. This data has for the most part been used to form background information and when supporting other findings. This can be said to be a form of descriptive method, aimed at understanding the behaviour of the informants (Krishnarao, 1961, p. 46). The next step was to make connections between the categories, which will be done in the next chapter. Before proceeding to the empirical findings, a discussion on the research quality is necessary.

## 4.5 Quality of the research

In the following section, the quality of the research will be discussed. At first glance, it might look like a comprehensive subchapter. Due to the various aspects that have been taken into account when conducting field research abroad, this has been necessary. The first sections look into the validity and reliability of the research, before ethical considerations, strengths and weaknesses will be discussed.

### 4.5.1 Validity and reliability

Different methods have been used in different phases of the study to answer the research questions. Due to the fact that findings and observations have been discussed with my fellow

student during the field research, and because of my self-reflection, diligence and critical view, the data material is regarded as credible and of high quality. Additionally, the data says something about what was intended from the start. According to Holme and Solvang (1996), these are all factors that led to the dataset's validity (p. 153). Another factor that says something about the validity of the findings is the transferability of them. This is where it becomes useful to make a distinction between the inner and outer context. As already introduced, the outer context relates to the context where the research was conducted (Kruke, 2010, p. 36). Descriptions and findings of the outer context, Uganda, cannot be generalised and applied in a different context as there are many factors that come into play. One could use the findings from the villages to assume it would be similar in other Ugandan rural communities, as this is part of the same outer context. Factors tied to the inner context, however, have an even bigger potential for transferability (Kruke, 2010, p. 36). This is tied to organisational structures, individual's characteristics, responsibility between group members, statuses and empowerment within women's groups that might be compared to similar groups elsewhere in Africa. Aspects of female empowerment and women's groups in Uganda may therefore, based on this distinction, also be valid elsewhere.

The interviews for this thesis were conducted abroad, they were held in informal settings and in some cases there were language barriers. This can on one side be regarded as a methodological limitation with regards to the reliability of the thesis. On the other side, the methods and procedures are documented and described in a manner that would enable other researchers to replicate and conduct the same investigations and be left with similar findings. Describing the methods and proving that they are dependable enhance the quality of the study and thereby the reliability of it (Holme and Solvang, 1996, p. 153; Yin, 2002, p. 38). Still, other researchers can use the same interview guide, but get other answers or interpret the answers differently. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning they had the form of conversations which naturally also are influenced by the interviewee. This entails that other researchers will get different answers from the same interview, even if the same interview guide was used. This does not mean that one researcher has produced the "correct" account and the other has not, as they both are

authentic (Blaikie, 2008, p. 246). The account can be regarded as explanations of what one has learnt in the field.

Another factor that has enhanced the reliability of the methods, is the fact that the local social worker was used as an interpreter and the questions were pre-tested on him beforehand. He was then able to adjust some of the questions to make them more culturally appropriate and to make sure that he understood all of the questions correctly.

Table 3 briefly sums up what has been done to obtain different kinds of validity and reliability. Internal validity is connected to the credibility of the data material (Yin, 2003, p. 34; Kruke, 2010, p. 95), whereas external validity is tied to the problem of knowing whether a study's findings are generalisable beyond the immediate context (Yin, 2003, p. 37).

| Type of quality | How it has been achieved |
|---|---|
| Internal validity | A variation in the methods, and considering rival explanations (during discussion, chapter 6), being two researchers present during the field work and using an interpreter with knowledge about the culture and the communities. |
| External validity | By showing which factors can be transferred to other contexts and making the distinction between inner and outer context. |
| Reliability | Thorough descriptions of the methods, the reliability of the informants have been considered (i.e. if they were expecting something in return, see next sub chapter), the reliability of the written sources have been considered. |

Table 3: Types of quality. Author's own work, 2020.

## 4.5.2 Ethical considerations

As mentioned, the villages have been visited before, in connection with the research conducted by Nykvist in 2016. Considering this, it can be discussed if the informants were somehow used to participating in interviews and handling questions regarding delicate subjects. It is hard to say how this may have affected the answers, but it is worth reflecting on the ethical implications of conducting a study on communities experiencing challenges with poverty, sanitation and inequality. This also applies to the informants outside the village. It should also be mentioned

that we have been considerate and polite, we have not pressured anyone into participation and we have been neutral, but informative, when conducting the field research.

On the question of the informants' anonymity and safety, the research is regarded to have been conducted in the most considerate and respectful manner possible. First of all, informants were asked several times if they wanted to participate and it was mentioned multiple times that the participation was voluntary, and that one could refrain from answering any of the questions. However, no matter the context or their situation, many informants seemed eager and willing to talk to us. Secondly, informants have been anonymised, and there are no documents or notes that can reveal their identity or contact information. Thirdly, it has been reflected upon whether the informants were expecting something from us, being researchers from abroad. Commenting on informants' enthusiasm when meeting a researcher, Andersen (2006, p. 289) argues that this can be affected by many conditions, some tied to personality and others to an interest in research in general. He further contends that the researcher can represent a resource, where his point of view or insight can be of value in a vulnerable situation. This can make informants more willing to enter the dialogue, be more open and it creates opportunities with regards to what one can allow oneself to ask about. In other words, there is the possibility that the informants answered what they thought was "correct" or what they thought I wanted to hear. However, the number of informants is a contributing factor to elucidate the underlying structures that led them to engage in women's groups. Lastly, in addition to explaining the voluntariness of participating, it was also emphasised that we could not contribute with any financial support to individuals, to the villages or to any organisations.

The research has been conducted in a country and a context far away from my own. An issue that is encountered in all research is that one can only collect data from a certain point of view, making observations based on culture, discipline-based knowledge and past experiences. Blaikie (2008, p. 120) states that this will always lead to a gap between the data collected and the reality they are supposed to represent. This is complemented by Poltera and Schreiner (2019, p. 15), who advise researchers to avoid unfair, inequitable expectations and explanations of women who lead. Further, they discourage classifications where one treats "women" or "Africa" as a

homogenous group. It is therefore with great humility that I am merely trying to make an account of what I have seen and how I interpret it in light of the chosen theories. In sum, I would say that the research has not caused any harm or disadvantages for anyone involved in the data gathering.

### 4.5.3 Strengths and weaknesses

Use of other methods may have produced different data. On one side, a more participatory observation may have given a broader insight in the daily lives of the women interviewed and women's standing in general. On the other side, Blaikie (2008) contends that interviews in combination with observation is considered a useful alternative to participant observation (p. 234). Group interviews with women or female leaders might also have given interesting insights and different perspectives, especially when observing that some women became more shy or quiet when men were around. It is possible that this could have allowed another form of interaction, subsequently providing greater insight into why certain opinions about culture or gender issues are held (Blaikie, 2008, p. 234). A quantitative data gathering involving female community leaders across Uganda would have generated a much more nuanced image concerning factors such as class, culture, upbringing, education and gender and how these factors shape the experiences of leadership. Although some of these factors have been researched and will be addressed, the scope of this thesis does not allow extensive comparison between leaders concerning all of the mentioned factors. As Blaikie (2008) contends, sample size is always a compromise between the ideal and the practical (p. 212). Seeing that time was limited, a smaller sample has been used, having in-depth and detailed data from some informants instead of having an extensive amount of data that could be applied to a large population.

Reflecting upon the choice of research strategies, it is clear that the use of other strategies would have produced different results, reflections and perspectives. For example, the use of an abductive strategy would perhaps have given a more thorough understanding of the social lives of the female leaders and in general, as well as their inner motives for engaging in women's groups. This may have resulted in the development of a theory, and would have guided the research in the direction of understanding and explaining the phenomenon of women's groups to

a larger extent (Blaikie, 2008, p. 101, p. 116). This would have required a longer field work period, more elaborate interviews and a more extensive use of questionnaires.

Female empowerment is a contested and multifaceted term. Being empowered is a subjective experience, and one cannot say that a woman that feels empowered is right or wrong. Empowerment of people living in poverty has been an intended outcome for many development programmes over the years, but attempts to measure and monitor it have typically relied on indicators and methods decided by outsiders (Sida, 2010, p. 15). It would be inappropriate for me to state someone's feelings and thereby determine women's experiences of empowerment. By exploring the informants' own views and events they have actually experienced, this can be presented in a reasonable manner, in addition to presenting their opinions. In the empirical section it will be important to separate statements about the factual conditions and the statements that are expressions of the informants' own assessments and interpretations (Andersen, 2006, p. 291). A helpful tool in this situation is the fact that a recorder was used in two of the interviews, whereas notes and discussions with my fellow student were used in the other cases. The empirical findings and the discussion will be presented in a manner that clearly shows when a statement is from an informant or not. Being aware of this during the research and writing process is considered a strength.

Some of the in-depth interviews were held after visiting the villages. This made it possible to get a better understanding of the culture, the context and women's situation before conducting longer interviews. Regarding the interviews, I consider it a strength that this firsthand information was not only gathered, but also observed in its natural context. This makes for a broader understanding than if I had interviewed for example only NGOs or leaders at a higher level. The combination of methods has produced different results. As we shall see in the next chapter, the results are not conflicting nor are they coinciding, but they definitely complement each other. The questionnaires have contributed to a wholesome insight into women's standing in the communities, what challenges they meet in their daily lives, what their areas of focus are and how they execute their responsibilities in the household. The interviews have given a more detailed insight, and seeing that most of them were done after the visits in the villages, I could

confirm that I had understood the data correctly and go even deeper into the data. This is one of the major strengths of the thesis.

Language has been a barrier during this field research in different ways. Firstly, although many of the informants spoke English (as it is one of the official languages in Uganda), Ugandans have a particular dialect and some words do not have the same meaning or connotation in Uganda as it would have in, for instance, a European country. Examples that have been observed include "feminism", "fornication" and "safe". Secondly, as mentioned, we used an interpreter during the village tours, who translated answers for the questionnaires and for some of the interviews. We cannot know with complete certainty if he was able to translate everything correctly and perhaps some nuances have been left out. That being said, we observed him rephrasing when he was not sure if the informant understood the question. The use of the interpreter has other implications, including him being a male talking directly to women about issues and challenges they have in the community. Even though he has been working in and around the communities for a long time, there was obviously a gender dimension unfolding that is beyond anyone's control. Besides, we do not know about his past experiences or relationship with the informants. Sometimes we observed women being more open and laughing when he was not there, other times it was the opposite. Other elements, like the informants' personalities, also have a say in this. That being said, it would be in his interest, as a social worker, to explore these issues and provide an authentic representation of what the informants shared. I do not regard his relations to the informants as problematic, nor do I believe that he has altered the informants' statements. One the one hand, the fact that he is male might have affected the informants' answers, and this can be considered a weakness of the study. This suggests that it would have been desirable to use a female interpreter. One the other hand, as a social worker, he provided us with permission to conduct research in the villages, and it would not have been possible without him.

Regarding the interviews held in the villages, they did not provide new information in the end, signalling that the amount of interviews was suitable. During the village tour we walked around as a group with several representatives from the village council. The fact that there were many people present during some of the interviews can be considered a weakness, as this probably has

affected some of the answers. Informants may have been intimidated by the number of people or the fact that some of them were representatives from the village council. The informants may have omitted information or not have spoken as freely as if we had been alone. Nonetheless, this was the only way to get access to the villages. Considering the interviews and the choice of informants, it was also planned to interview between one and three male leaders to get their perspectives and to be able to compare their answers with the women's answers. As mentioned, due to the coronavirus disease, the field research was interrupted. Not having both genders represented can be regarded as a limitation. Nonetheless, it would have been futile to interview male leaders before having a broad view of the women's perspectives.

If I were to conduct the same kind of field research again, I would have prepared a shorter interview guide. I would also have scheduled a longer research period, and hoped to be able to complete the whole field trip. This would have let me get in touch with even more informants, especially male informants. It would also have been possible to go back to some informants with follow-up questions. Lastly, I would have tried to employ a local female, ideally a research assistant, who could aid as an interpreter. In summary, however, I am very pleased with the methods used in the research, and I regard them as being credible.

# 5. Empirical findings

This chapter presents the findings that will be used to answer the problem statement, "What makes women in rural Central Uganda actively participate in women's groups?". First, some descriptions belonging to the outer context will be given, before information concerning the villages and informants will be touched upon. Finally, the empirical findings are presented following the order of the research questions.

## 5.1 Revisiting the outer context

As indicated in chapter 2.1, Uganda is currently experiencing various forms of development. As my fellow student had already visited Uganda on several occasions, she was able to see some distinct changes in the rural communities. One highly visible development was the expansion and renewal of roads and bridges. This serves as evidence of how the economy has shifted from a focus on recovery to focusing on growth, as formerly mentioned. In regards to equality and women's standing, my fellow student saw changes in how some women dressed. In her previous visits to Uganda, she had seen more women wearing traditional dresses (*gomez* or *gomesi*) and clothes that covered most of their bodies. Now, more women were wearing trousers and t-shirts or tops. As a consequence, more women were now able to sit on motorcycles like men, with one foot on each side (as opposed to sideways).

Further, gendered power differences have formerly been seen in customs and relationships between women and men. For example, it has been common practice for men to pay a bride price to a woman's family upon marrying her. One informant said "When they are marrying you, the men pay the bride price. So that one alone, pays you in the home. You can't divorce, because they paid bride price". However, another informant disclosed that this is changing: "Some time back, people looked at their children, their girls, they looked at them as things to be sold. (...) If a man takes you to his home, you will be a servant in that home, because they paid for you. But these days it is trying to change". Women were in other words seen as property, living under their husband's authority (Coughtry, 2011, p. 50). On the other side, there are factors that

underpin the fact that Uganda is still a patriarchal society. During the trip we used the same driver on several occasions, who told us about an increasing number of female taxi drivers in Uganda. The female drivers are however facing harassment and fear of assault. Furthermore, one informant said that it is still the women's responsibility to prepare food for her husband. From the document analysis, it was found that the meaning of gender equality and empowerment can be contested terms in Uganda. Integrating the concept of gender equality into one's interpersonal relationships is seen as a challenge (Mullinax et al., 2013). Evidence of this is also found in the questionnaire, where over 80 % state that the head of household is a male adult.

## 5.1.1 Villages and informants

The informants are divided into three categories. Group A has some kind of formal responsibility in the women's groups in the communities visited (for example, being the vice leader of a savings group). Group B has a more informal responsibility, as they are not elected or hired, but have chosen to volunteer in their church, run for a political position or similar. Group C women are formal leaders, or are employed by an organisation. The informants are identified by a reference number. When relevant, the reference number of a specific informant is noted, especially when she is referred to several times. For an extensive overview of all the informants, see appendix A.

During the field trip we stayed at the Nyenga Foundation founded in 2009, an NGO based in the Kabizi perish. At the Nyenga Foundation there is a children's home, a health centre, a nursery and a primary school. Additionally, the foundation does various community work. One of the informants from group C had a leading role in the foundation. In relation to our stay at this foundation we got to know people in and around this community. Among other things, we attended church service one morning, in the church where two informants from group B are active. This also serves as an example of how religion and everyday life is intertwined, as the church was the source of social encounters.

Informant C2 was the leader of an organisation that enables girls and young women to make their way out of poverty. The organisation initiates skills training and micro financing among

other things, both at their facilities and out in the communities. This is a fairly large organisation, compared to the women's groups in the villages. In the villages the groups had between 30-50 members, whereas this organisation could have almost 500 girls and women attending skill training during one year, according to the informant. In addition, the organisation facilitates the startup of smaller groups or programs. The informant struck me as firm and strict, but also maternal and highly committed. She called the members of the group "my girls" and jokingly said that her husband thinks she is overworked and spends too much time at the organisation. She came from a poor peasant family, but was able to study teaching and finance.

For the data gathering in the villages, two villages were visited, already referred to as village A and B. According to the questionnaires, the main source of income in both villages is farming. Village B is located near Lake Victoria, letting some of the households make a livelihood from fishing as well. Village B has a small commercial centre with shops and cafés, whereas village A is more isolated. The general impression of village A was that it was a poor community. Factors that support this are the lack of electricity, low water quality (all water had to be boiled), many people lacked teeth and the residents had worn out clothes (with holes and/or that were too small). During the tour, a representative from the village health team followed us and measured the overarms of children to indicate their level of malnourishment. She used a special measuring tape for this purpose, going from green to red. It was constantly in the red zone, indicating malnourishment. Village B seemed to be more affluent, with some houses having electricity, the women had longer hair (indicating that they had the economy to prioritise visits to the hairdresser, whereas in village A most women had shaved heads), some houses had satellite dishes or antennas and children generally looked healthier.

In total, 41 households were interviewed. Out of these, around 66 % said that they did not think women felt safe in the community. The main reasons for this were lack of business opportunities (65 %) and poverty (20 %). However, 34 % suggested women's groups as a positive opportunity for women in the community. Seven of the informants for the interviews were based in these villages. They are all part of the informants in group A. They had various responsibilities, for

example being the leader for the village health team or being the *jajja*, which is Luganda for *grandmother*, meaning the wisest and most experienced member of a women's group.

In the sections that follow, findings connected to each research question will be presented, as well as a summary of the findings.

# 5.2 What characterises female community leaders in rural Central Uganda?

The first research question is important because it explores the commonalities between female leaders, and points out the criteria that seem to be needed to become a successful leader according to the women interviewed. Factors that have been mentioned by the informants will be divided into personality and traits, motivations and cultural factors.

## 5.2.1 Personality and traits

A frequent characteristic of the informants was the number of women who had higher education and/or experience as teachers. In addition to this, the informants for the in-depth interviews were talkative. Many of them gave elaborate answers and one informant talked for 30 minutes without pause. Informants from group A said that being talkative is important to mobilise meetings, calming down members when there are issues within the group, and being social. This can be seen as a contrast to some of the females observed in the villages, who were shy, giggling, fidgeting with sticks or waiting for their husbands to answer. Other factors emphasised by the informants were personality, skills and knowledge. One informant said "I felt that I had the abilities within me. And I needed to use these abilities, to share them with others" (informant C2). Another informant emphasised the importance of being hard working (from group A). Other personality traits recognised by several informants were discipline, respect, trust, being a perfectionist, having experience and respecting the culturally accepted dress code (for instance, not wearing short skirts). It appears that all of these traits are important if one is to, for example, be responsible for the money in a group (as they use only cash) or if one is to moderate group meetings.

## 5.2.2 Motivations

This section addresses the personal motivations for engaging in women's groups and for becoming a leader. Some motivational factors include external inspiration or support. Five informants mentioned this (from groups A and C), and it involved either inspiration from strong female caretakers surrounding them when growing up, a specific role model or encouragement from the group itself. Other motivational factors are connected to a communal spirit or to policies from the government, which will be further elaborated.

Firstly, there is a strong communal spirit in rural Uganda. This is reflected in the way several of the informants are consistent in the use of "we" when talking about a group, a village, a community or Ugandans in general. An example is informant C1, saying: "(...) for others it is the way of doing things, I mean, it's what we do. I think it has its roots deep into who we really are as Africans. (...) We are very communal, very, very communal people, regardless of the changes, the development, colonialism, and whatever, we've always been communal people, so the aspect of sharing things is not foreign to us". This is consistent with findings from the document analysis where Rarick et al. (2013, p. 4) suggest that Ugandans are collectivist by nature, and Coughtry (2011, p. 23) underlines Uganda's traditions with communal tribes. Several of the informants highlighted giving something back, helping people, wanting to motivate others, being part of something bigger and creating opportunities as other motivations to engage in groups or taking responsibility. Although these can be considered factors that come from within and are tied to contributing to the community, these are also factors that can be tied to the communal spirit. Informant C1 also connects this to the Christian values of Uganda and said: "it is one of the values to share, to give is more blessed than to receive".

Secondly, concerning policies from the government, one informant from group A said: "It is a government policy that women can be leaders. It is motivating when women are encouraged to be leaders". This reflects findings from Nykvist (2016, p. 19), where female leaders indicated that government policies supported women to establish group projects. Additionally, the president of Uganda recently pledged to boost women funds and allow more women to access

business financing (Bita and Bwambale, 2020, p. 3). This is however a contrast to one of the informant's opinions (from group B) about the sitting president. When asked about her motivation for engaging in politics, she said "The gentleman who has the power, he couldn't perform". She further elaborated that funds coming from the government often stop at the district level and are not funnelled properly to the communities, implicitly saying that corruption is prevalent. This became her motivation for engaging in politics. From the document analysis it was found that the government of Uganda also acknowledges that corruption remains one of Uganda's major challenges (GOU, n.d., p. 5). During the field trip we experienced a minor example of this, when a taxi driver secretly slipped some money to a guard at the airport in order to skip a security check.

### 5.2.3 Cultural factors

Cultural factors in connection to this work are factors that are related to Ugandan culture in a wider sense. This can include aspects around the way of life, behaviour, language and traditions in the Ugandan society (Schiefloe, 2011, pp. 127-128). The factors that were mentioned by the informants can be connected to gender roles and behaviours within the culture.

A commonality in the interviews conducted with informants from the villages (all from group A), was that some of them said that they were in need of help from the outside, or they blamed politics or politicians for being in an unfortunate situation. One informant from group C acknowledges this, when asked about women's standing in the communities: "(...) to convince people that they can be empowered, they can do something or they can help themselves out of poverty without waiting to be given [*help*] all the time". This suggests that it is a common issue that some people expect help or support.

On one side, some women may stand in danger of being left passive, waiting for help from someone else, exemplified by informant C2 saying: "Some people think that to do something you need someone who are [*sic*] supporting you always. (...) I didn't wait for someone to do it for me, we didn't depend on any aid from outside the country, we had to do it ourselves". The notion of waiting for help or being passive could be connected to Ugandan culture and

spirituality, where fatalism plays a role, or it can be tied to a desire for quick rewards and short term thinking. In her report, Nykvist (2016, p. 20) found that poverty had created frustrations, lack of patience and lack of commitment. This is also consistent with the findings from Rarick et al. (2013, p. 6), where it is suggested that Uganda has a culture that is "very short-term oriented". As a consequence, many women may need a push to make a change. Female leaders or government policies can in some cases be seen as this push. Relevant to this subject is one informant from group C saying that her responsibility towards the women involved "helping them to realise their ability to support themselves". This is supported by another informant from group C, saying "But the general situation is that women still need a lot of reminding about who they are, what they can be, what they bring to the table". This suggests that many women in the communities need this extra encouragement to be able to break out of their patterns.

On the other side, corruption within politics or seeing that politicians are not serving women's rights are motivational factors for engaging in politics, as seen in the former section. A finding from the document analysis suggests that this can be seen in connection with gender roles. Some female politicians have been trying to change the narrative from women belonging in the kitchen (Gachanja, n.d.). These women want to prove that they can succeed in politics and be good leaders. This is supported by Evans (2012, pp. 2-3), who contends that community leaders want to make a meaningful difference on the social issues that are important to them. The women who are breaking the patterns in engaging in politics or leadership roles are seen as a contrast to those who are left passive. This divide can also be seen in the informants, which will be further elaborated on.

The informants from group C seem to be more firm and optimistic about the future of women's standing, female empowerment and gender equality. They have reflected upon these subjects, for example one of them said "It is about uplifting the potential of women, helping women to uplift themselves, to evoke their potential, to do something". Another one said: "They bring a lot more to the community if they choose to actually break away from the things that keep them from going up to the next step". There is a certain belief in women that can be sensed in the way these informants talked about the subject. When informant C2 was asked if she ever felt hopeless or

discouraged, she cried out "Oh, no, no, no! I am just getting the strength and courage more, as long as you're doing something that people are appreciating and it is producing results, there is a way of feeling more strong". This is a contrast to informants from group A, who had a more deterministic view. When asked about other challenges women face in the community, one informant from this group said "Culturally aspect of the women's responsibility to prepare food to her husband. (...) Women has [*sic*] to bring water for a long way *and* work". When asked why it was like this, she answered it had to do with the culture. The women in group C are educated and have already improved their conditions, for example by having a good job or being able to buy a house and car. In other words, they had seen and experienced a transformation in themselves but also in other women in the communities. Informants in group A have to a lesser extent experienced these transformations, which can explain why they are less optimistic.

## 5.3 How are female leaders empowering women in the community?

In order to answer this research question, it has been important to underline some of the challenges that women in the rural communities are facing. Furthermore, the organisational structures and the functions of the women's groups have been explored to see exactly how empowerment might be taking place in the communities.

One of the main challenges for women in the rural communities in Uganda is the lack of income. This is a consistent finding from the questionnaires and from Nykvist (2016, p. 12). Therefore, female leaders in the communities helping women to help themselves can be an important contribution to empowerment. This may be in the form of guidance (e.g. to receive legal assistance or access to health services), skills teaching (like sewing, hairstyling, farming) or counselling. A finding from the document analysis suggests that women who engaged in trading circles experienced more than just an increase in income, but it opened the door to personal and social transformation (Dolan and Scott, 2009, p. 215). These are all contributions to the process of being less dependent on one's husband and gaining self-awareness about one's capacity and situation. This is reflected in a statement from one informant belonging to group C: "Because they are becoming aware of their rights. And they are getting to know their rights from these

local organisations that we are introducing them to". It is also reflected in the questionnaire, where over 30 % answered "women's groups" when being asked what the positive opportunities for women in the community were.

Some of the leaders play a role not only as formal leaders, but as role models and as inspiration for others. An example of this is one informant from group C, saying:

"(...) but this is what I really want to do, to help people, be the people person, help young people realise who they are meant to be, what they can do, break free from, you know mindsets' chains and societal chains (...). What I would wish the most for this community, is for them to realise who they are. Once the women realise who they are, both in the lives of their children and even in the growth of their communities, there's no stopping any community whatsoever in as far as development is concerned, because it starts from the mind. If you believe it, you can achieve it".

Helping women change their mindsets in this manner, being their role models and contributing to women questioning the status quo, was mentioned by several informants as important.

In informant C2's organisation the members have to do everything in the group themselves. If they want to be part of a micro financing circle, they have to make a financial plan where they explain how they are going to use the money (for example to start a business, buy a cow, etc.). In this way, they are involved in the whole process, which is possibly leading to a transformation in how they perceive themselves, seeing that they are able to change their situation. This also suggests that they are making their lives more sustainable, as they are taking full responsibility for their investments and the outcomes of them. It is a wish for some of the leaders to bring men into this process, not only by letting them give consent to their wives, but to let them see what they are actually doing in the groups. Participating in the whole process of starting a business entails showing women of the community that it is not about money or waiting for someone to help them, exemplified by informant C2, saying "You have to think outside the box. Don't wait for the money. Think, and see how we can do something". This can be concerned as a remedy to what was suggested in 5.2.3, how some women are waiting for help from the outside. This suggests yet another transformation of mindset and also another way of gaining self-awareness.

## 5.4 What are the risk factors of actively engaging in women's groups in rural Central Uganda?

The following sections will present risk factors in engaging in women's groups. Some explicit mental barriers brought up by the informants are discouragement from the community, rumours, discontent members in the group, stress and intimidation or push-back from men or elders. These factors were not as recurring as other factors that will be focused on in this section.

Risk factors that are tied to getting consent from one's spouse can be tied to cultural reasons, as Uganda is a patriarchal society where one follows traditional customs. This can explain some of the explicit mental barriers mentioned above, such as discouragement and push-back from men or elders. Usually the women are responsible for the unpaid work at home while the man carries most of the burden when it comes to gaining an income for the family. Informant C3 said the following: "Women still face restrictions from their spouses to take on civil and leadership roles e.g. to be on water user committee [*sic*]". To defy one's husband can in this context lead to reprisals. Some men in the communities are reluctant to let their wives engage in groups and the women had to be convinced:

"That is why we are telling them: 'We are not empowering you to become violent. We are not empowering you to disrespecting [*sic*] your husband. But we are empowering you to become an asset to the home by providing', not always waiting for their husbands, not always becoming a burden and waiting for the man" (informant C2).

Some females are able to convince their husbands, whereas others engage in the group despite this. However, one informant belonging to group C pointed out a recent development, where she saw that cases with domestic violence were going down as females were now contributing in the home: "I've seen that, women who are contributing to the family, they are highly respected, less violence and [*more*] peace in the home when she is not depending on the man". Also, informant C3 said "I must also say that working in a group many women are breaking those barriers [*as in barriers to take leadership roles*]". Hence, it seems like the power structures in the homes and in

society are changing. An additional factor relating to cultural issues is the constant balance some women are battling to sustain, between expectations from society and being true to herself.

A heavy workload can be seen as both a mental and a physical form of risk, and can also be connected to expectations in the culture. As mentioned earlier, it is anticipated that the woman is responsible for fetching water and firewood, cooks all the meals and cares for the children. In the questionnaire, 36 % answered that women had the sole responsibility of fetching water, whereas 39 % answered that women shared this responsibility with others in the household. Out of the 41 respondents, only one household reported that this was done by the male, and nine households (22 %) reported that it was the children's responsibility. Sometimes there are certain risks connected to the activity in itself, for instance, a well may be at the bottom of a steep hill. In response to challenges associated with water supply, almost 22 % said it was dangerous to collect the water or challenging to carry the water. 34 % indicated that they had to walk long distances to fetch the water. Consequently, a female engaging in a women's group needs to do this in addition to her responsibilities in the home. Hence, a female may know that she is increasing her workload, but she is also well aware of her responsibilities in the home.

There are certain elements from the empirical findings that were unexpected. Firstly, the feeling of ease when talking with women about their issues and challenges in the communities. Sometimes it seemed easier for informants to talk about domestic violence than it was for them to point out challenges they had with the quality of water. My feeling of unexpectedness may be due to my own background, coming from a context where GBV and domestic violence is far less frequent, and thereby less talked and thought about. Another unexpected finding was the importance of women's groups in general. During the document analysis this was barely communicated and it was surprising to see the importance of them during the field research. A third surprise was to which extent men were being involved in some of the women's groups. When it comes to factors that were somewhat as I had imagined, thereby signifying that it is thoroughly communicated in the literature, the value of motivated individuals is one example that arose. Another example is the value of learning new skills and capacities to feel worthy and gain self-respect.

The following table sums up the most important findings in relation to each research question.

| Question | Findings |
|---|---|
| RQ1: What characterises female community leaders in rural Central Uganda? | <ul><li>The commonalities lie within personality, traits, motivations and cultural factors concerning gender roles.</li><li>The communal spirit in Uganda may have an impact on why some women become leaders or take responsibility.</li><li>Some female leaders have a desire to act as a "push" for women to make a change. Government policies may also act as this push.</li></ul> |
| RQ2: How are female leaders empowering women in the community? | <ul><li>Helping women to help themselves (through capacity building and counselling), thereby making the women less dependent on their husbands.</li><li>Being role models and changing mindsets.</li><li>Women are included in whole processes, thereby gaining self-awareness of their own capabilities.</li></ul> |
| RQ3: What are the risk factors of actively engaging in women's groups in rural Central Uganda? | <ul><li>Mental risks include: discouragement from the community, rumours, discontent members in the group, stress and intimidation or push-back from men or elders.</li><li>Common risk factors are getting consent from one's spouse and heavier workload (mentally and physically).</li></ul> |

Table 4: Summary of findings. Author's own work, 2020.

# 6. Discussion

This chapter provides a discussion of the presented empirical findings in light of the theoretical framework. Together they are used to answer the research questions. The chapter is structured in the same manner as the previous chapter, by research question.

## 6.1 What characterises female community leaders?

Evidence from the study shows that characteristics among female community leaders are found in their personality, their motivations and cultural factors in the Uganda society. This is reflected in a study formerly introduced, which found that there are many aspects that affect leadership, not only personality (Brown and Nylander, 1998, p. 86).

Concerning personality and traits, factors such as being talkative, having discipline, earning trust and having experience were of relevance for the informants. These factors reflect findings in the document analysis, where several general attributes of effective leaders were found (Lituchy, Ford and Punnett, 2013, pp. 212-213). Among them are honesty, integrity, being knowledgeable, being a good communicator, being inspirational, creating vision and taking action. A note of caution is due, as this is a finding from "Africa in general". However, it is noteworthy that it coincides with the findings from the interviews.

A contrast to the talkative women interviewed, are the silent and shy ones. On one side, this can be a personality trait or a sign of respect. On the other side, this reflects what has formerly been mentioned by Rowlands (1997), who found that women participating in women's groups can build the confidence to become more talkative and participate in groups or other activities. By contrast, in groups where both genders meet, women "will be silent and scarcely participate beyond being physically present" (p. 96). Remembering that we were a group of both females and males (including the interpreter) on the village tour, this suggests that it could have had an impact on the informants.

Another commonality from the interviews was encouragement from the group members or from the communities around. These are factors that can be seen in relation to a woman's motivations. Encouragement from the government, in the form of policies, was also touched upon by some informants from group A. The feeling of someone who is supporting you seems to be crucial in feeling able to go through with something that might be intimidating. Rowlands (1997, p. 92) suggests that groups with a philosophy that encourages or supports women are those who can evoke change. In other words, having the support from either governmental policies or from the group itself, can be seen as important. On the other side, one of the informants was motivated to engage in politics because of her discontent with the president and his work. Corruption was also stated as a motivational factor for this informant to engage in politics. Related to this is some of the other informants' wish to help people in the community who are suffering. Poltera and Schreiner (2019) argue that the "need for ethical, effective leadership is fundamental in Africa, given the relatively high rates of corruption, inequality and oppression" (p. 15). It may be that the female leaders are acting as "agents of change" (as suggested by Evans, 2012) and taking leadership roles in the communities because they see something that needs to be done.

When it comes to cultural factors, waiting for help or being passive in a certain situation has earlier in the study been connected to fatalism, a desire for quick rewards and short term thinking. Rowlands (1997) recognises that many women see "poverty as their lot, and have a fatalistic attitude to many things, which has to be overcome every time they decide to act" (p. 104). This has formerly been introduced as an obstacle for empowerment and will be further elaborated in the next section. Nevertheless, this can be said to be true for many of my informants, as traditional knowledge systems can pose a fatalistic vision of the future (UNISDR, 2006). However, some of the informants did not have this mindset and instead of becoming passive, they invested in long term activities and projects. An example is informant C2, saying: "It's not all about money, but as long as you're interested in what you are doing and you are ready to drive your dream ahead then you can do something". This seems to be more of the exception than the rule, though. This inconsistency may be due to the small sample size. However, it could be argued that many women in the communities need a push to make a

change, and that some of the female leaders can act as this push. They can contribute in changing mindsets and paving the way for other women to follow.

Another finding that relates to the cultural factors is the point already introduced about Ugandans being a communal people. The notion of sharing, even though one might have very little, was observed in the communities, in everyday life and even when visiting a nursery. On one side, this is a trait that may have its roots from former tribal cultures that were highly collective. On the other side, the notion of sharing or helping each other can also be connected to Christianity, as pointed out in the last section. Either way, both elements have led many of the women to give something back to the community.

A final point to be made in relation to this research question is the importance of an individual. This point relates to several categories introduced thus far, including personality and motivations. For a group to be "successful", and thereby lead to female empowerment, it seems of importance to have a significant individual as a leader. An example in relation to this is informant C2, leading what seems to be a highly successful group. She fulfils the three criteria set out by Rowlands (1997, p. 90). Firstly, she is a local woman, running a programme that is not implemented by outsiders. She understands the members' situation as she has been in it herself. Secondly, she has the skills and experience, as she has teaching and finance education. Thirdly, she is committed to the work and to the women she works with. Being a strong role model is something that characterised some of the informants, and is also regarded as an instrument for female empowerment. The informant is also part of group C, the group of women that gave the impression that they were more positive towards women gaining awareness and new opportunities. This suggests that a significant individual can be of importance for a women's group to be successful, and thus it represents some of the characteristics of female leaders.

The aim of this research question was to examine the characteristics of female community leaders in rural Central Uganda. The characteristics have been divided into different categories, one of them being personality and traits. This category can be considered as part of the inner context, seeing that it is tied to an individual's characteristics and responsibilities. Being talkative, having discipline, earning trust and having experience are all part of this, and thereby

factors that characterise female community leaders. Furthermore, female community leaders can be said to be characterised by their motivations, as many of the informants were motivated by external encouragement and their wish to help others. The last category of characteristics used in relation to this research question was cultural factors. Fatalism, communal traditions and Christianity are characteristics that belong in this category. Successful female leaders are able to break out of a fatalistic attitude and short term thinking; they are able to invest in long term projects, to be creative and change mindsets. The last argument relates to the significance of an individual, combining factors within her personality, her motivations and her background. As this is tied to an individual's characteristics, this is also part of the inner context. To summarise, female community leaders are among other things characterised by being talkative and having relevant experience, by external support and a wish to help others and their ability to break free from patterns in the society.

## 6.2 How are female leaders empowering women in the community?

The results from this study already points in the direction of empowering women as not being about single actions or factors, but including transformations or processes. This is in line with Rowlands' definition of empowerment as processes leading to perceive oneself as able, making decisions, undoing negative social constructions, gaining self-awareness and understanding one's situation. To answer this research question, some of these transformations will be pointed out, as well as the effect that they are having. Additionally, there is some evidence of the core aspects of empowerment being achieved. The core aspects include an increase of self-confidence and self-esteem, a sense of agency and a sense of being worthy. Different forms of power have already been introduced and will be reinvestigated in the following sections. But first, it will be useful to look at some concrete evidence of women being empowered in the communities studied and obstacles for their empowerment.

There is some evidence that suggests that women are in the process of being empowered through actively engaging in women's groups. To be able to engage in activities outside the home, meeting other women in the same situation and actively doing something to change one's

situation are factors that can lead to an empowerment process. As pointed out in the theoretical framework, it can also lead to an increased sense that things are possible. The female leaders are seen as facilitators in these cases, as they mobilise, host and moderate meetings. Furthermore, sharing one's problems, getting support and participating in capacity building are other factors that can facilitate changes. Finally, external support (e.g. government policies) has been mentioned as a factor that can facilitate the empowerment process. On the other side, being passive, having a fatalistic view on one's situation, lacking control over one's time (e.g. spending time on fetching water or firewood) and poor access to healthcare are all obstacles for empowerment. Some of the risk factors presented in section 6.3 can also be seen as obstacles for empowerment. Finally, being in a relationship where the husband has the "power over" a woman can be seen as an obstacle to empowerment, which will be discussed further.

As it has been argued in chapter 3, it is crucial that a woman moves from the realm of "power over" to one of the other dynamics to be able to experience some form of empowerment. In regards to this study, "power over" can be seen in situations where a female being empowered is experienced as intimidating for the husband, as she will not only gain power but also be able to exercise power over him. When a female receives consent from her husband or joins a group in spite of not receiving it, it suggests that the "power over" has transformed into a "power from within", where the woman may have gained self-acceptance and self-respect. This relates to the core aspects of empowerment which, if encouraged, may change self-perception and thereby challenge the internalised oppression and increase the "power to" and "power within". This can lead to a change of the power structures in a household (Rowlands, 1997, p. 130). "Power to" and "power with" can be said to directly relate to the work of women's groups, as they are generative forms of power associated with a group being able to tackle problems together. A female leader can act as a role model or support in these cases. "Power from within" is a strength within, or an individual conscientisation, based on self-acceptance and self-respect which may lead to self-awareness. It may further lead to an understanding of one's situation, which is critical to be able to change the current situation. In the next section, the distinctions will be employed to some of the empirical findings to evaluate if some of the women in the community are being empowered.

"Power to" is regarded as a generative form of power, where power leads to the creation of new possibilities. An example relevant to this research is in the way that informant C2's organisation provides skill teaching that leads to more women having access to jobs. It has already been argued that the teaching of specific skills can encourage the process of empowerment through a widening of economic choices. This is supported by findings in the document analysis, where Dolan and Scott (2009) found that engaging in trading circles led to empowerment among the women they studied in South Africa. Additionally, Rowlands (1997) contends that women's groups can enable the individual to develop social skills, as meeting other women in the same situation is seen as important when becoming less dependent on one's husband. Following the argument from above, it is not necessarily the fact that they are becoming economically independent that is empowering, but the fact that they are gaining self-respect and awareness of their situation. The leaders facilitate this process by providing capacity training or simply a place to gather.

When it comes to the form of power that is labelled as "power with", this relates to a group feeling and being able to tackle problems together. This can be seen in informant C2's saying where she encouraged women in the group to think outside of the box and not wait on help from the outside. This led to her implementing a saving's culture in the organisation. Other examples from the informants are groups coming together to buy a cow they can share, learning a new skill together or buying a motorcycle to share. One informant said that working in a group leads to women breaking barriers and that they are now able to take leadership roles. Also suggesting this, is the finding from Dolan and Scott (2009) suggesting that trading groups opened the door to personal and social transformation. Again, a female leader introducing a new way of thinking makes it seem like the psycho-social process is the key to female empowerment.

When it comes to "power from within", a factor that can explain how female leaders are empowering women in the community is in the way that the groups are organised. The women that are members of the group take part in decisions and in the organising of the group. Additionally, female leaders are helping women to help themselves, for example by teaching them different skills. Furthermore, in some groups the women have to present a plan for their

investments when applying for micro financing. This suggests that women in the groups are making their lives more sustainable, in that they are taking full responsibility for their investments and the outcomes of them. This can mitigate the cases where some women are left passive, but more importantly it can be seen as processes that lead to perceiving oneself as able and gaining self-awareness. Gaining self-awareness can also be attributed to the role some of the leaders play, not only as formal leaders, but as role models and inspiration for others. Helping women change their mindsets and contributing to women questioning the status quo was mentioned by several informants as important. Gaining awareness might enable some women to start a process towards changing power structures or aspects in their lives that are tied to gender roles. This suggests that if changing mindsets and gaining self-awareness is achieved, the core aspect of empowerment can be achieved.

This research question set out to explore how female leaders are empowering women in their community. By going through the theoretical framework and empirical findings connected to this research question, while pointing at evidence of power dynamics that are changing, I argue that there are several empowerment processes finding place in the communities. Some of them are due to the female leaders, while others can be attributed to the women's groups in themselves. Offering a place where women can engage in activities outside the home is one way the leaders are enabling positive changes that can facilitate the empowerment process. Leaders that are involving the husbands in the groups can be of importance, as Rowlands (1997) suggests that "empowerment of women is for women to experience; it does however, require the behaviour of men to change" (p. 132). Also, enabling processes where women gain awareness and can change power structures can lead to the core aspects of empowerment. Some of these processes can be obtained without the presence of a female leader. However, it seems of importance to have a successful group and, as shown in the previous section, this can be obtained through a significant individual. The factors that have been pointed out are all tied to the inner context, which relates to organisational structures, gender dynamics and female empowerment, which again might be compared to similar groups elsewhere in the world.

## 6.3 What are the risk factors of actively engaging in women's groups in rural Central Uganda?

Remembering the definition already introduced, risk is the combination of possible consequences and the uncertainty that is tied to these consequences (Aven, 2006, p. 41). The risk factors presented can be divided into mental, physical or cultural factors. When discussing these factors, it is important to acknowledge that risk perception is socially and culturally constructed, and that the context has an impact on how individuals understand and handle risk. For example, discussing what activities are regarded as "safe" for women in rural Uganda is not the same as for a woman in an urban setting in Norway, as it is isolated in a personal perception of reality (Engen et al., 2016, p. 82). This is important to remember throughout this section. Furthermore, the risk factors can be identified following Renn's distinctions (2008, pp. 106-109), between situation-related characteristics, beliefs associated with the cause of risk or by personal involvement.

Some of the mental factors are, as already introduced, discouragement from the community, rumours, discontent members in the group, stress, intimidation and push-back from men or elders. Further, findings point in the direction of balancing expectations from society and from oneself as a mental risk, as one can assume that this can lead to stress or take up headspace. The physical factors are mostly coupled with a heavy workload tied to a woman's responsibilities in the household. This is in line with Rowlands' (1997) findings concerning forms of empowerment that are increasing a woman's burden. By engaging in a group, a woman may know that she is increasing her workload, but she willingly takes the risk and thereby avoids any cognitive dissonance associated with the risk taking. This suggests that the risk can be something positive, as already pointed out by Aven (2006). The risk she is facing is necessary to be able to embark on the process of her personal empowerment. The woman has accepted an amount of risk (or workload), and thereby found a balance between different considerations. However, there is uncertainty tied to the consequences of her actions. Following the theoretical frame already set, this kind of risk is identified as a situation-related characteristic, seeing that she has personal

control over the risk and thereby increasing her risk tolerance (Renn, 2008, p. 106). Furthermore, the way she perceives the risk can also be connected to beliefs associated with the cause of risk (Renn, 2008, p. 108), since it is connected to traditional values and her responsibilities as a woman. As already mentioned, traditional knowledge systems, customs and religion can all have an impact on risk perception.

Another type of situation-related characteristic is the risks associated with fetching water. This can be a challenging task, as the water source may be far away and the jerry cans have to be carried by hand or balanced on the head. Besides, the water source may be difficult to access. However, if one is under the impression that one is in control of the risk, the risk tolerance increases. When it comes to the contextual factor identified as personal involvement, an example is how many of the informants choose to devote so much time and effort into the women's groups, even though it increases their workload. Informant C2 was so involved in her work that it was affecting her marriage and her leisure time. As she is both practically and emotionally involved in the risk-causing activity, one can argue that she has a more positive perception of risk connected to this activity (Renn, 2008, p. 109).

Cultural risk factors can be tied to power structures in relationships and traditional values. It has already been said that some of the findings suggest that the power structures in the home are changing. For this to happen, some women have already taken a risk in defying their husbands. This can be seen as what was previously identified as the situation-related characteristics of risk, where having personal control over a choice increases one's risk tolerance. Taking the risk of engaging in a group can change the dynamics of a relationship as the responsibility in the household is shared. For example, a woman may contribute with an income, a new skill or simply showing that she is an asset to the household. Once the responsibility in the household is shared, the woman is able to gain a new kind of power in the situation, thereby moving from "power over" to one of the other dynamics (Rowlands, 1997, p. 83). This can be connected to the example given by informant C2, who wants the woman to become an asset to the home and not wait for the man to provide for her. This can also be characterised as a positive kind of risk,

which again can suggest that the risk she is facing is necessary to commence on the process of her personal empowerment.

A final argument related to the risk factors women face when engaging in a group, is that women getting involved in the whole process of a group or participating in a form of capacity building are more likely to be part of a sustainable development process. As Becker (2014) contends, it is important to be aware of these gradual and mundane risks that are evolving when, for instance, being unemployed or lacking skills over a long period of time. Reducing these vulnerabilities is the best way to reduce risk for sustainable development. This reflects the formerly quoted statement from Drolet et al. (2015), stating that women's knowledge and agency must be recognised and supported to build resilience, reduce disaster risk and contribute to sustainable development. This can be seen in relation with the statement of informant C2, who observed a recent development where cases of domestic violence was going down in households where the woman was contributing. Also, the capacity building provided in some of the groups (for instance, learning to farm, to sew, to braid hair, etc.) give women more possibilities when it comes to employment. This suggests that it is worth taking some risks to be able to reduce long term risk.

The main goal of this research question was to investigate what risk factors are met when actively engaging in women's groups in one's community. Some of the identified risk factors are discouragement, stress, heavy workload and defying the power structures in the home. The risk factors pointed at have for the most part been characterised as positive risks. The risks women are facing are to a large extent necessary to initiate the process of change that can lead to her empowerment. There are several possible consequences and there is uncertainty tied to them. In many cases the women accept this uncertainty as it may bring a positive change to her life. The factors that have been pointed out concerning a woman's responsibility in the home, and the risk she faces when defying her husband are tied to her gender. Certain responsibilities and behaviours are expected, and if these expectations are not met, they can pose a risk. The factors are part of the inner context, as it is tied to gender dynamics. The risk factors connected to fetching water and unemployment are associated with the area itself, for example a specific steep

hill or the unemployment rate of Uganda. These are part of the outer context, and will be more difficult to apply in a different context. However, if suitable and if cautiously employed, it may still be feasible.

In summary, the objective of the research questions was to explore and describe the phenomenon of engagement in women's groups, and to give an account of why this particular incident seems to occur in the given context. Through a discussion of the empirical findings in the light of the theoretical framework, the research questions have been answered. Different aspects belonging to the inner and outer context have been highlighted, facilitating the transferability of the findings. The discussion is seen as building blocks that in the next section will be used to answer the problem statement.

# 7. Conclusion

This study sought to explore the problem statement "What makes women in rural Central Uganda actively participate in women's groups?". The research has successfully been fulfilled through document analysis, interviews, questionnaires and observations. Findings relating to RQ1 suggest that commonalities between female leaders lie within personality, traits, motivations, context and cultural factors concerning gender roles. Through discovery and description some of the changes that are apparent in the communities which lead to the process of female empowerment have been pointed out, thereby answering RQ2. Female leaders who are helping women to help themselves (through, for example, capacity building and counselling) is a sustainable way of making women less dependent on their husbands. Furthermore, this is changing the power structures in households, benefitting both the woman and the man. Additionally, female leaders are empowering women in their communities by being role models, changing mindsets and encouraging some women to change their lives. The study has investigated how women perceive themselves and the risk factors they meet. Some of the risk factors of engaging in groups are heavy workload and defying one's husband. These findings have been used to answer RQ3. By answering the research questions it has been possible to identify important aspects that make women in rural Central Uganda actively participate in women's groups, which in the following will be addressed.

Being talkative and having discipline are seen as important when engaging in women's groups. When it comes to the leaders' motivations, many were encouraged by the community members or members in the groups to take responsibility. This not only motivates, but it also gives a feeling of support. Receiving encouragement or support are additional factors that can make women engage in groups in general, not only for the leaders. Many of the leaders had relevant experience and came from poor conditions themselves. The urge to help people who are suffering, working against corruption and inequality and seeing that something needs to be done are strong motivational factors that lead some women to take responsibility within women's groups. The fact that Ugandans are seen as a communal people is significant to understand why

someone, who might not have many resources or time themselves, spend a lot of time actively engaging in a group.

Women's groups are seen as opportunities to meet other women in the same situation, sharing problems, getting support and participating in capacity building. Learning specific skills and developing social skills are seen as important to enable the empowerment process. Being met by strong female leaders that can act as role models and an inspiration, can help women gain awareness about their situation and thereby change power dynamics between husband and wife. This can lead to an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem, a sense of agency and a sense of being worthy, which are the core aspects of female empowerment. These are factors concerning female empowerment that can make women actively participate in women's groups.

A woman may engage in a women's group either because of encouragement or inspiration from others, or from realising the potential it may bring. Actively participating in a women's group can be seen as a positive form of risk taking that can lead to the improvement of a woman's conditions by changing the power structures in the home. Realising this, can make some women participate in women's groups and in some cases female leaders are the ones who inspire, enlighten and motivate the women to do so. By contributing to the household income or the decision making in the house, the responsibility between husband and wife can be shared. Once responsibility is shared, a woman is able to gain a new form of power. Identifying and reducing vulnerabilities such as unemployment and domestic violence is crucial to reduce long term risk for sustainable development. Furthermore, one can say that women's knowledge and capacity has been acknowledged and can thereby be used to improve the society's resilience.

Lack of employment opportunities has been presented as a challenge for many of the informants and for women in the communities in general. This in itself can make women actively participate in women's groups, as the groups represent opportunities for capacity training or saving circles, and thereby a widening of economic choices. Female leaders can have a wish to contribute to the creation of these opportunities, as they may have been in a similar situation themselves. In addition to this, being a leader will for some women represent a job opportunity in itself.

In some cases, female leaders are acting as "agents of change" as they see that something needs to be done. In other cases, the groups themselves are the catalyst that make changes happen and thereby enable the process towards female empowerment. Either way, women's groups are seen as highly important for the women in the communities and engaging in them is a way to improve one's life. It is further regarded as a way to build resilience and reduce risk. Perhaps it is the multiple functions of women's groups that make them a sought out place to be: it can provide new skills, new friendships and new opportunities.

The purpose of this thesis was to show how women can be strengthened and used as a resource for themselves, their families and their communities. By actively engaging in a women's group, a woman is able to express her potential and her capacity. The study has shown how women can be something other than vulnerable, and that they are crucial when it comes to reducing risk within sustainable development.

## 7.1 Further research

As we are celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, it is clear that further research should continue to focus on women and how women are able to shape the future of their communities. Further research could benefit from a quantitative study involving female community leaders across Uganda, to show a broad, but nuanced, image. It could include factors such as class, culture, upbringing, education and gender, and how these factors shape the experiences of female leadership in Uganda.

A general observation throughout the field research, was that women seemed to know more about issues concerning, for example, water. This makes sense, as they are the main collectors of water. This would be a fruitful area for further work, where research could look into the importance of gender and priorities one makes in the communities. As water usually is a woman's responsibility, does this suggest that communities with female leaders or chairpersons are more concerned about risks that involve water? Does it suggest that these communities have better access to safe water sources? Further research could answer these questions.

Finally, this study has focused on personal empowerment. A natural progression of this work is to assess the collective empowerment of communities and how women's groups play a role in this.

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# Appendix

## Appendix A: List of informants

| Position | Gender | Type of interview | Code |
|---|---|---|---|
| Representative for the women in a village. | Female | Semi-structured, conversation | A1 |
| "Jajja" of women's savings group. | Female | Semi-structured, interview | A2 |
| Security officer in women's savings group. | Female | Semi-structured, interview | A3 |
| Vice leader of a women's group. | Female | Semi-structured, interview | A4 |
| Members of a women's saving group. | Two females | Semi-structured, interview | A5, A6 |
| Leader of Village Health Team (VHT). | Female | Semi-structured, conversation | A7 |
| Former marriage counsellor, has founded a school, former teacher, responsibility in the church. | Female | Semi-structured, in-depth interview | B1 |
| Politician, running for MP. | Female | Semi-structured interview | B2 |
| Leader of a foundation (with school, nursery, children's home, health centre, etc.). | Female | Semi-structured, in-depth interview | C1 |
| Leader of a female empowerment organisation. | Female | Semi-structured, in-depth | C2 |
| Coordinator of a women's group. | Female | Structured, response over email | C3 |
| 41 residents of two villages. | Mix of female (29) and male (12). | Questionnaires and conversations | N/A |

# Appendix B: Document analysis

| Literature | Focus of literature | Relevance |
|---|---|---|
| Skard, 2001: *The mothers' continent: Among girl brides, healers and child soldiers in Western and Central Africa*; Balsvik, 2004: *Africa in a historiographical perspective*; Coughtry, 2011: *Patriarchy and the trap of masculinity: a post-colonial analysis of violence against sexual minorities in Uganda.* | Historical, cultural, geographical literature. | To get a better understanding of Uganda in general and specifically women's standing in East Africa. |
| Bangura, 2019: *How we can empower Africa's women*; Gachanja, n.d.: *8 Most Interesting Africa's Female Politicians*; Poltera & Schreiner, 2019: *Exploring examples of women's leadership in African contexts;* Lituchy, Ford, Punnett, 2013: *Leadership in Uganda, Barbados, Canada and the USA: exploratory perspectives.* | What it takes to empower African women to become leaders, how women have played a part in ending conflicts, traits in men vs women. How women faces social discrimination and unequal pay and how this affects leadership. Characteristics in female leaders and African leadership. | These can be used to see if there are any overlaps with findings from interviews and to characterise community leaders. |
| Dolan & Scott, 2009: *Lipstick evangelism: Avon trading circles and gender empowerment in South Africa.* | Trading circles and gender empowerment in South Africa. | This can be used to see if there are any overlaps with findings from interviews and back up main literature on capacity building and female empowerment. |
| Mullinax, et al., 2013: *Community understanding of and response to gender equality and empowerment in Rakai, Uganda.* | A study that investigates how Ugandans define and understand gender equality and empowerment. | Backing up main theory and nuances the use of the term "empowerment" and "equality". |
| Brown & Nylander (1998): *Community leadership structure: differences between rural* | Definitions of community leaders. Communities with women in their leadership | Use in addition to theory and interviews. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *community leaders' and residents' informational networks;* Evans (2012): *Community leadership.* | structure were more viable than similar communities that did not have women represented. | |
| UN Women, n.d. a: *Women and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).* | Women and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), how women possess ideas and leadership to solve challenges with SDG's | To show that some challenges need to be solved by women. |
| UN Women, 2018b: *A Global Women's Safety Framework in Rural Spaces.*; UNDP India, 2007: *Towards a disaster resilient community in Gujarat.* | Capacity-building at tea plantations to address gender and GBV issues, experience from training local women in a skill with the result being challenging stereotypes. | The results from the work already done can help underline the potential of capacity building and how it can lead to change. |
| Global fund for Women, n.d.: *Meet the Future: East Africa's Young Women Leaders*; Mawad & Hariri, 2018: *Syrian refugee challenges traditions in community leader role*; Africare, n.d.: *Capacity Building*; UN Women, 2017: *Humanitarian action and response.* | Meetings with women who are leaders, who had training and how this makes them feel. | This can be an addition to the interviews, as it has quotes from women's experiences with becoming leaders and feeling empowered. |
| Opare, 2005: *Engaging women in community decision-making processes in rural Ghana: Problems and prospects.* | Potential roles of female community leaders, female leaders and their positions in community organisations, reasons for low female representation in decision-making structures | Can show different factors and attributes that enable women to become community leaders. |
| UN Women, 2018b: *A Global Women's Safety Framework in Rural Spaces;* Bangura, 2019: *How we can empower Africa's women.* | Harassment and violence across the value chain (from plantations to household), safety for women. Threats and risk for women who protest against injustice. | Shows relevant and realistic threats for women in East Africa. |

| Nykvist, 2016: Evaluating our work; Government of Uganda, n.d.: *Uganda Vision 2040*; Rarick et al., 2013: *An Investigation of Ugandan Cultural Values and Implications for Managerial Behavior* | Reports with statistics on demography, policies and the governments' goals and aspirations for Uganda. | Used to compare findings and impressions, to quantify some of the findings and to get an impression of the context and culture. |
| --- | --- | --- |

# Appendix C: Interview guide, female community leaders

*My name is Caroline and I am conducting field work in connection with my master's thesis in societal safety at the University of Stavanger (Norway). I am interviewing community leaders and organisations that work with female empowerment and development. This survey is anonymous. We will only note the village where you live, your age and gender. By answering the following questions, you agree to participate in the survey.*

**Introduction and background**
- Can you tell me about yourself?

**Current leadership/area of responsibility**
- Can you please tell me about the project/community/position you are in?
- What is your role? (Is this formal or informal?)
- What are your responsibilities? Or, when do people come to you for advice?

**Personality and responsibility**
- Can you describe yourself as a person?
- Can you describe yourself as a leader?
- What made you feel that you could take this responsibility/be a leader?
- Is there anyone who has inspired you or motivated you along the way?

**Education and training**
- Have you completed primary school?
- Have you completed other education?
- Have you attended other courses, training or similar?

**Risk**
- What are physical dangers you might face in your job/responsibility? (i.e.: dangerous environment, etc.)
- What are psychological/mental dangers you might face in your job/responsibility? (i.e.: discrimination, harassment, bullying, stress, etc.)
- What are the main challenges for you as a leader/caretaker/role model?
- In your experience, do you think these challenges would be different if you were a man?

**General**
- What is the situation like for women in the community?
- What are the main positive things (opportunities) for women in your community?

- What are the main challenges for women in your community?
- Do you think women feel safe in the community?
- If you could get rid of one kind of danger/hazard (physical or mental) in the community, what would that be?
- In your experience, do you think the position of women in your community has changed during the last 5 years? How?

**Summarising questions**
- What are your goals for the future, concerning your community/organisation?
- My research's aim is to find out why female community leaders feel strong and that they have freedom and power to do what they want and what connection this has with them becoming community leaders. If you think back on your experiences and our discussions today, can you please tell us what you think are the main reasons you felt that you could become a community leader?
- Is there anything else you feel we should have talked about that we didn't?
- Is there anyone else you think we should talk to?

*Probing questions:*
- *Can you give me an example?*
- *When did that happen?*
- *What was that like for you?*
- *When you mentioned this did you mean that in a positive or negative manner?*

***Traits (not to be asked, this is the researcher's opinion to think through after the interview)***
*Is she open? Friendly? Oversharing? Funny? Warm? Cold? Rude? Anything else?*

# Appendix D: Questionnaire

This questionnaire was part of my fellow students' research concerning water security. Questions concerning women's standing in the communities are in part C.


**A. General information and household characteristics**

Date: _____  Age of the respondent: _____  Village/Quarter: _____

Gender:  Male ☐  Female ☐

1. Number of household members: _____
   a. How many are children up to 18 years? _____
   b. How many are adults between 18 – 59 years? _____
   c. How many are persons over 60 years? _____
2. Who is the head of household? _____
3. What are the main sources of income in your family? _____

**B. Water**

1. What is the source of your drinking water?

   Borehole/deep well ☐      Shallow well ☐          Lake Victoria ☐
   Rainwater harvest ☐       Spring water ☐
   Other: _____

2. How much time is used to collect water during a day?

   Less than 30 minutes ☐    30 minutes - 1 hour ☐    Over 1 hour ☐
   Times per day: _____

3. Who is the main water collector in this household?

   Children under 18 years ☐    Adult female ☐    Adult male ☐
   Why: _____

4. What is the main transport used for collecting water?

   Bicycle ☐              Hand/head lifting ☐
   Wheelbarrow ☐          Bodaboda ☐
   Other: _____

5. Do you have any challenges with water supply?　　Yes ☐　　　No ☐
   a. If yes, what are they?

   　Long distances ☐　　　Contaminated water ☐
   　Few water sources ☐　　　Dangerous to collect ☐
   　Other: _____

   b. If yes, what are the consequences in your daily life?

   _____
   _____
   _____

6. Do you have any challenges with water quality?　　Yes ☐　　　No ☐
   a. If yes, what are the consequences in your daily life?

   _____
   _____
   _____

7. Do you have any other water related challenges?　　Yes ☐　　　No ☐
   a. If yes, what are they? _____

8. Have these challenges changed over time?　　Yes ☐　　　No ☐
   a. If yes, how have they changed?

   _____
   _____
   _____

9. Who is responsible for water supply in this village? _____
10. Are there any efforts made to meet water related challenges in this village?
    Yes ☐　　　　No ☐

    a. If yes, what are they?

    _____
    _____
    _____

**C. Other**

1. If you could get rid of one danger or hazard in the community, what would that be?

   _____
   _____
   _____

2. Do you think women feel safe in the community?     Yes ☐     No ☐

   a. If no, why not?

   _____
   _____

3. Name 3 positive things (opportunities) for women in your community:

   1._____
   2._____
   3._____

4. Name 3 challenges for women in your community:

   1._____
   2._____
   3._____

5. Is there anything you want to add?

   _____
   _____
   _____

# Appendix E: Image of analysis process