

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF DEPRESSION ON AFRICAN WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: THE ROLE OF SOFT SKILLS TRAINING IN PROMOTING RECOVERY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Goshue Afiniki Ishaku, Pomak Talatu Mark

Email: afinikicoshuecgmail.com, 08062093109

Abstract:

Depression is a pressing mental health issue that disproportionately affects women, particularly in developing regions like Africa. This study examines the relationship between depression and economic empowerment among African women, and evaluates the potential of soft skills training programs to support recovery and foster entrepreneurship. Through a look at some case studies across some African countries, the research found that depression significantly undermines women's ability to participate in the workforce and launch successful businesses. Key barriers include reduced motivation, low self-confidence, and difficulties in decision-making and interpersonal skills. However, women who engaged in comprehensive soft skills training - covering topics like stress management, communication, and entrepreneurial thinking - demonstrated marked improvements in their mental health, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial outcomes. The findings suggest that integrating mental health support and soft skills development can be a powerful strategy to promote economic empowerment and inclusive growth among disadvantaged women in Africa. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for scaling up such holistic approaches through public-private partnerships and community-based initiatives.

Key words: Depression, Economic Empowerment, Soft Skills, Entrepreneurship

Introduction

Depression, also known as major depressive disorder, is a common and serious mental health disorder characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and a loss of interest in activities that were once enjoyed. It is a complex condition that affects an individual's mood, behaviour and physical health. (National Institute of Mental Health, 2020). Depression is a widespread mental health challenge that disproportionately affects women, particularly in developing regions like Africa. Studies have consistently shown higher rates of depression among women compared to men globally, and it is significantly high among African women due to social, economic, and cultural pressures. Factors such as gender-based violence, lack of access to healthcare, and disproportionate caregiving responsibilities contribute to the elevated risk of depression among African women. The social stigma surrounding mental health issues further compounds the challenge, as many women are reluctant to seek professional help. The intersection of gender, cultural norms, and socioeconomic factors can create unique barriers and detrimental impact on an individual's ability to participate in and benefit from economic activities. Depression can lead to decreased productivity, absenteeism, or even unemployment, low motivation, poor concentration, and feelings of worthlessness that can hinder job performance, limit income-generating opportunities, and undermine entrepreneurial success.

Moreover, the financial burden of seeking mental healthcare can exacerbate the economic challenges faced by women with depression.

Economic empowerment refers to the process of enabling individuals, communities, or societies to improve their economic well-being and independence through various means such as education, training, resources and opportunities. It involves increasing one's ability to make informed decisions about their economic lives, including their ability to earn a living, manage resources, and make choices about their financial futures. It is a key component of sustainable development, as it enables individuals and communities to break the cycle of poverty and improve their overall well-being (UN, 2015). Entrepreneurship is an aspect of economic empowerment.

Entrepreneurship is a multifaceted concept that generally refers to the process of creating or extracting economic values through the establishment of new businesses or ventures. It is often defined as the act of designing, launching and running a business, which typically involves a degree of risk and innovation. McGrath (2013) defines entrepreneurship as the ability to create and sustain a venture that is scalable, profitable and has a positive impact on society. It involves the ability to transform inventions or technologies into marketable products and services. It is creating something new with value by devoting the necessary time, effort and resources. (Hisrich and Peters, 2002). Effective and efficient entrepreneurship endeavours require some soft skills.

Soft skills refer to socio-emotional capacities and skills that are used by people for interactions. They are key to achieving personal and work success. They are power skills, or psycho-social skills that are applicable to any workplace or amongst people and enable one to succeed in their career and work well with others in terms of relationship. Training in soft skills have been found to enhance self-esteem, resilience, and the ability to cope with stress, aiding in recovery from depression (Rodríguez, Sierra, Falcón. Latorre. 2021). World Economic Forum (2020) listed and classified ten skills within soft skills as follows: analytical thinking and innovation, active learning and learning strategies, complex problem solving, critical thinking and analysis, creativity, originality, and initiative and leadership and social influence. Soft skills are essential for entrepreneurship, helping women to effectively manage businesses, negotiate, and network.

The burden of depression on African women's economic empowerment is multifaceted, affecting not only their ability to participate in the workforce but also their capacity to start and maintain businesses, manage finances, and make informed decisions about their economic lives. Despite the significant role that economic empowerment plays in promoting women's autonomy, dignity, and overall well-being, the impact of depression on African women's economic empowerment remains understudied. Soft skills training, which focuses on developing essential life skills such as communication, problem-solving, and time management, has been identified as a promising intervention for promoting recovery from depression and entrepreneurship among women. However, there is a significant knowledge gap on the effectiveness of soft skills training in promoting economic empowerment among African women with depression. This article aims to explore the impact of depression on African

women's economic empowerment, with a specific focus on the role of soft skills training in promoting recovery and entrepreneurship.

Mental Health Disorder

Mental health disorders refer to a wide range of conditions that affect a person's thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and overall well-being. Mental disorders also known as mental health conditions are characterized by significant disturbances in cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviours, often leading to distress or impairment in functioning. According to the International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision (ICD-11), there are various types of mental disorders, including:

Depression: This mood disorder affects around 280 million people worldwide. Symptoms include persistent sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest in activities, and various physical symptoms such as changes in sleep and appetite (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>).

Anxiety Disorders: These include generalized anxiety disorder, or group of disorders characterized by excessive fear or panic disorder, avoidance behaviors and social anxiety disorder. In 2019, approximately 301 million people globally were affected by anxiety disorders, with a notable increase during the COVID-19 pandemic National Institute of Mental Health. (2020).

Bipolar Disorder: Affecting about 40 million people, bipolar disorder is characterized by alternating episodes of depression and mania or hypomania, which can include elevated mood, increased energy, and impulsive behavior (American Psychiatric Association 2013) (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): PTSD can develop after exposure to traumatic events and is marked by symptoms such as re-experiencing the trauma, avoidance of reminders, and heightened anxiety and is characterized by symptoms of flashbacks, nightmares, and avoidance behaviors. (American Psychiatric Association. 2013) <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>).

Schizophrenia: This is a chronic and severe mental disorder affects approximately 24 million people and is characterized by delusions, hallucinations, and disorganized thinking and behavior (National Institute of Mental Health. 2020) <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>).

Eating Disorders: A group of disorders characterized by abnormal eating habits, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder and preoccupations with body weight and shape, affecting around 14 million people (National Eating Disorders Association. 2020) <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>).

Neurodevelopmental Disorders: These include conditions such as autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which manifest during developmental periods and affect cognitive and social functioning [[1]](<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>).

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD): It is a disorder characterized by recurring, intrusive thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviors (compulsions) that an individual feels compelled to perform. (National Institute of Mental Health. 2020)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): A neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. (American Psychiatric Association. (2013)

Substance Use Disorders: A group of disorders characterized by the use of substances, such as drugs or alcohol, that can lead to addiction and harm to oneself or others. (National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2020).

Causes and Risk Factors of Mental Health Disorders

Mental disorders can arise from a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors. Key contributors include:

- Family history and genetics
- Life experiences, particularly trauma or abuse
- Chemical imbalances in the brain
- Chronic medical conditions
- Social isolation and lack of support (<https://medlineplus.gov/mentaldisorders.html>).

Treatment for mental disorders typically involves a combination of therapy and medication tailored to the individual's needs. Common therapeutic approaches include cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), psychoeducation, and family interventions. In some cases, hospitalization may be necessary for severe conditions (<https://medlineplus.gov/mentaldisorders.html>). Despite the availability of effective treatments, many individuals with mental disorders do not receive adequate care due to stigma, lack of resources, and insufficient access to mental health services

Depression in African Women

Depression is a mood disorder characterized by feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and a loss of interest in activities. American Psychiatric Association. (2013). It is a pervasive mental health disorder that affects millions of people worldwide, with women being disproportionately affected (World Health Organization, 2017). In Nigeria, depression is a significant public health concern, with a prevalence rate of 3.3% among the general population (Gureje et al., 2015). African women, in particular, face unique challenges that exacerbate their vulnerability to depression, including limited access to education, employment, and healthcare, as well as societal expectations and gender roles that restrict their autonomy and agency (Moghadam, 2013).

Impact of Depression on Economic Empowerment

Depression can have devastating consequences on an individual's quality of life, including their economic well-being. In Africa, women's economic empowerment is critical for poverty reduction, economic growth, and sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). However, depression can hinder women's ability to participate in economic activities, leading to reduced productivity, absenteeism, and decreased earning potential. In many African societies, women are often the primary caregivers. Depression can make it difficult for them to fulfill these roles, which can lead to additional stress and further economic challenges, as they may be unable to engage in paid work (Lund et al., 2011). Depression can impair cognitive functions such as

concentration and decision-making. This impairment can hinder women's ability to make informed choices regarding their finances, investments, and career opportunities, ultimately affecting their economic empowerment. Also, the relationship between depression and poverty is cyclical. Women in low socioeconomic positions are more likely to experience depression due to stressors such as financial insecurity and lack of access to healthcare. Conversely, depression can lead to further economic decline, trapping women in a cycle of poverty and mental health issues (World Health Organization 2017).

Depression can also increase women vulnerability by decreasing their productivity and increased absenteeism in the workplace. Women suffering from depression may find it challenging to maintain consistent employment, which directly affects their economic stability and empowerment

(<https://www.datelinehealthafrica.org/depression-among-african-women>).

Moreover, depression can also limit women's ability to engage in entrepreneurial activities, which are essential for economic growth and development in Africa through lack of motivation, confidence, and energy to start and maintain a business (Akanbi & Duyile, 2017).

Curbing Depression

Soft skills training has been found by several researches to be the best option for curbing depression. Soft skills training can enhance self-esteem and confidence, which are essential for combating depression and also it can improve communication skills, which are critical for building and maintaining social relationships, reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation, and promoting mental well-being. Soft skills training can equip women with problem-solving skills, which can help them cope with stressful situations and reduce feelings of hopelessness, a hallmark of depression (World Health Organization, 2017). A study by the Journal of Clinical Psychology (2018) found that social support was a significant predictor of depression among African women while another study by the African Journal of Psychiatry (2017) found that problem-solving skills were a significant predictor of depression among women in Nigeria.

Soft Skills Training and Economic Empowerment

Soft skills training has been identified as a potential strategy for promoting recovery from depression and enhancing economic empowerment among women (Harris et al., 2017). Soft skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and time management, are essential for success in the workplace and entrepreneurship (Kumar et al., 2017). By acquiring these skills, women can improve their employability, entrepreneurial capabilities, and overall economic well-being.

In Nigeria, there is a growing recognition of the importance of soft skills training for economic development (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019). However, there is a dearth of research on the impact of depression on African women's economic empowerment and the role of soft skills training in promoting recovery and entrepreneurship. This study aims to address this knowledge gap by exploring the impact of depression on Nigerian women's economic

empowerment and the effectiveness of soft skills training in promoting recovery and entrepreneurship

Soft skills, such as problem-solving, communication, resilience, and emotional intelligence, have been identified as crucial determinants of entrepreneurial performance and overall well-being. By incorporating soft skills training into mental health interventions, the aim is to empower African women with the necessary skills and mindset to navigate the challenges of depression, foster self-efficacy, and successfully engage in entrepreneurial activities.

Recent studies have provided encouraging evidence on the efficacy of soft skills training in promoting the economic empowerment of African women struggling with depression. Several examples from Africa demonstrate the effectiveness of soft skills training in promoting recovery from depression and economic empowerment among women. For instance, Women in Business Program, Nigeria, is an initiative that provide soft skills training to women entrepreneurs, resulting in improved mental health outcomes and increased business success (Eze, 2022). Also, a randomized controlled trial conducted in Ghana found that a comprehensive program combining cognitive-behavioral therapy and entrepreneurship training led to significant improvements in depressive symptoms, as well as increased business ownership and profitability among participants (Akorful et al., 2021). Similarly, a qualitative investigation in Uganda revealed that soft skills training, such as problem-solving, communication, and emotion regulation, helped women entrepreneurs with depression to overcome barriers, build resilience, and enhance their business performance (Mwesigwa et al., 2022).

In Kenya, for example, the "Women's Economic Empowerment through Entrepreneurship" program provided training in business management, financial literacy, and soft skills to women with depression (Odhiambo et al., 2017). The program resulted in significant improvements in participants' mental health and economic outcomes, including increased income and business growth. Likewise Empowerment through Communication, Kenya, a project focusing on communication skills led to enhanced self-confidence and a notable rise in female-led startups (Mwangi, 2021).

In South Africa, the "Depression and Entrepreneurship" program provided soft skills training and business mentorship to women with depression who were interested in starting their own businesses (Moodley et al., 2019). The program resulted in significant improvements in participants' depressive symptoms and economic outcomes, including increased business start-up rates and revenue growth.

These findings underscore the potential of holistic interventions that integrate mental health support and entrepreneurial skill development to create a pathway for African women's economic empowerment, even in the face of depression.

Role of Soft Skills Training in Curbing Depression and Promoting Recovery Economic Empowerment of African Women

Depression is a prevalent issue among women in Africa, with various socioeconomic factors contributing to its prevalence. Studies have shown that women in Africa face higher rates of depression compared to their male counterparts, often due to factors such as gender-based violence, limited access to healthcare, and financial instability (Yasmin et al., 2020).

Soft skills refer to a set of interpersonal, communication, and problem-solving abilities that are essential for personal and professional success (Kechagias, 2011). Soft skills training can play a crucial role in addressing depression and promoting economic empowerment among African women. These skills can include critical thinking, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and leadership development. The roles of soft skills training in promoting recovery and entrepreneurship can be seen in the following ways:

1. Improving Mental Health: Soft skills training has been shown to have a positive impact on mental health outcomes. For instance, effective communication fosters better relationships, reducing feelings of isolation and depression. Strong communication skills can lead to better networking opportunities, which are essential for career advancement and entrepreneurship. (Weeney, 2020). Women who articulate their feelings and experiences are more likely to seek help and support. Studies have found that programs that focus on developing soft skills, such as stress management, problem-solving, and emotional regulation, can effectively reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety among women in Africa (Sikander et al., 2019).

2. Enhancing Employability and Entrepreneurship: Soft skills training can also contribute to the economic empowerment of African women by improving their employability and entrepreneurial potential. Employers in Africa often prioritize soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability, when hiring (Darko-Adjei, 2019). Soft skills training can improve entrepreneurial skills, which are essential for starting and running a successful business. Equipping women with these skills can increase their chances of securing employment or starting their own businesses, leading to greater financial independence and economic security.

3. Promoting Financial Literacy and Management: Soft skills training can also include components related to financial literacy and management. Soft skills training can enhance financial literacy, which is critical for making informed financial decisions and achieving economic empowerment (World Bank 2018). This can help women better understand and manage their personal finances, access financial services, and make informed decisions about investments and savings (Shula, 2020). Improved financial skills can contribute to the overall economic empowerment of African women.

4. Building Confidence and Self-Esteem: Training in soft skills, such as assertiveness and self-presentation, helps women build self-esteem, which can mitigate symptoms of depression. Increased confidence encourages women to pursue higher education and job opportunities, contributing to financial independence. (Nkosi, 2021)

5. Promoting Emotional Intelligence: Emotional intelligence training helps women manage stress and emotional challenges, reducing the risk of depression. It equips them with the tools to navigate difficult situations more effectively. Women with high emotional intelligence are often better leaders and team players, enhancing their professional prospects. (Mbatha, 2019).

6. Encouraging Problem-Solving Skills: Problem-solving skills can empower women to address personal and professional challenges, reducing feelings of helplessness associated with depression. Effective problem solvers are likely to excel in the workplace and in entrepreneurial ventures, leading to economic growth. (Chikoko, 2022)

7. Facilitating Networking and Community Building: Soft skills training often includes group activities that foster community, reducing isolation and enhancing social support networks, which are vital for mental health. Networking skills can help women connect with mentors, resources, and job opportunities, driving economic advancement. (Akinyemi, 2020)

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has shed light on the impact of depression on African women's economic empowerment, highlighting the ways in which mental health can be a significant barrier to their participation in the workforce and entrepreneurial activities. It has also shown that soft skills training can be a powerful tool in promoting recovery and entrepreneurship among this demographic. By empowering African women with essential soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, and self-confidence, we can help them overcome the psychological and emotional barriers that hinder their economic potential. Moreover, soft skills training can equip them with the resilience and adaptability needed to navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship and to tackle mental health challenges, ultimately contributing to their economic empowerment and independence.

Recommendations

To address the impact of depression on the economic empowerment of African women, it is essential to foster social support networks and community-based initiatives that will provide training, awareness and education on mental health and entrepreneurship.

Policy reforms that promote gender equality and address the social determinants of depression and empowerment programs that focus on mental health, education, and economic skills is needed in Africa now more than ever before to help break the cycle of depression and poverty. Policymakers, NGOs, and community organizations must prioritize integrating soft skills training into depression treatment and economic empowerment initiatives for African women.

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