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Challenges Experienced by Men and Women in Informal Finance Groups in Gachagi Informal Settlement in Thika Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract:
Studies indicate that most people living in the informal settlements are usually poor and financially excluded. As such, they tend to rely on informal finance groups for their financial upkeep. Given that there exist several informal finance groups and for different purposes, this study sought to establish the challenges facing informal finance groups by men and women. The study was conducted in an informal settlement, namely Gachagi in Thika Sub-County, Kenya. The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design, and was guided by behavioral life cycle hypothesis advanced by Thaler (1954). The target population was 20 informal finance groups comprising 10 Rotating Saving and Credit Associations (ROSCAs), 5 welfare/clan groups, 3 Accumulating Savings and Credit Associations (ASCAs) and 2 investment groups. Out of the 20 informal finance groups, a sample size of 11 informal finance groups comprising 5 ROSCAs, 3 welfare/clan groups, 2 ASCAs and 1 investment group were selected forming a sample of 55%. The main respondents of the study were men and women members of the selected informal finance groups including group officials. Key study informants included the Divisional Social Services Officer (DSSO), the Chief and two elders from the informal settlement. Data collection tools were Focus Group Discussion guides for men and women in informal finance groups and interview guides for key informants. Data collected was cross-tabulated for qualitative analysis. Findings indicated that there were challenges which hindered smooth running of informal finance groups and therefore discouraged the participation and the rate of saving among men and women. These included poor governance, low attendance of group meetings, defaulting by members and burdensome gender roles among others.

Keywords: *Challenges, Informal finance groups, Informal settlement, Gachagi, Thika, Kenya*

1. Introduction

Informal finance groups face many challenges due to the fact that their activities and operations are very informal. These challenges include: delayed payments, poor management and governance of the groups, mismanagement of funds and theft. From an extensive field study by Siwan et al. (2003) in Kenya, it shows that ROSCA groups encounter two main problems: there are members who do not regularly pay their contributions and there are members who stop contributing after receiving the pot. Another challenge is the element of negotiability that these systems allow which enables powerful individuals to manipulate the groups to their personal advantage. Also, a few powerful community members take advantage of the weak systems; by quickly setting up a group, collecting funds from other members, taking big loans for themselves and defaulting to pay.

According to FinAcess report (2009), most of the groups reported members leaving the group, followed by those who reported members not paying contributions. These experiences were the most common across all types of groups. The implication of this is that there would be strong effects on cash flow within the group and the reliability with which members receive their payouts. 11.5% also reported funds were not available immediately although this was highest for independent ASCAs. The experience of poor cooperation was highest for investment clubs and independent ASCAs, which are clearly forms of groups where agreement is required on what to invest in or whom to lend to.

The report also indicated that theft and dishonesty were also the reasons why members stopped their membership. Respondents were also asked in more details the reasons why they stopped using ROSCAs and ASCAs. A frequency of 8.6% of the total survey sample reported varied reasons with the most prevalent reason being not having money left to save (FinAccess, 2009). Further reasons given for stopping use of ROSCAs were: money being taken away or stolen; the time and effort to attend meetings and fear of losing money. Then similarly to ROSCAs, the most prevalent problems were finding money to save, and fear of losing it. This reason was significantly associated with people's level of education: with a higher proportion of those with secondary education stopping compared to those with no formal education suggesting that it was a greater concern to better educated respondents. The fourth reason why respondents stopped using these financial services was the low interest rate paid on savings: one in ten stopped using ASCAs for this reason (FinAccess, 2009).

The majority of these respondents reported losses due to theft or fraud. This reflects the reasons for stopping using the service. The second reason for losing money in ROSCAs was reported as "went out of business/collapsed". This was in reference to the place in which savings were kept and interestingly, the responses are significantly associated with gender with a larger proportion of men than women reporting this reason. Again this was consistent with the view that men's ROSCAs are less successful than women's ROSCAs (FinAccess, 2009).

Research on ROSCAs in Benin found that 26% of the ROSCA members had experienced problems in their groups, with 25% experiencing 'premature death'. For about 40% of these respondents, the reason was financial irregularities such as irregular payments to the pot, members leaving the group early and not willing to continue paying or the groups organizer (president) leaving with the money (Dagnelie and LeMay- Boucher, 2008). They also found that ROSCAs that were organized and managed by one person performed much worse than ROSCAs that had a 'committee' managing its affairs, which therefore tended to have written rules and elected leaders. Handa and Kirton (1999) found that 10% of their Jamaican sample experienced problems in their ROSCA groups and these were mainly late payment (50%) or delinquency (25%) of the hand. Anderson et al. (2004) also discusses the problems of contributions faced by ROSCAS in Kibera slum, Kenya finding in particular that those who were late in the order or who had already received the pot often failed to pay.

The power dynamics of the social relations in which these systems are embedded are also a key source of their failure. Instances of ROSCA failure due to default suggest the influence of power relations in their operations (Bouman, 1995). The role of social relations of gender, kinship and age may also underlie problems of default and abuse. Gender has been argued to be a factor by Burman and Lambete (1995) who reported that the mobility of men means that the potential for them to migrate and leave debts behind is higher in South Africa, and also that men tend to default with higher amounts. Another factor affecting performance can be the involvement of close kin and groups varying in their rules over the involvement of close kin in a group. Some may decide to exclude close kin on the basis that social obligations among them may increase the risk and "undermine the trust of other members" (Bahre, 2002).

The fraudulent use of the group's fund is another source of failure. Underlying problems of illiteracy and hence difficulties in over-seeing the books of accounts can either be a source of power struggle since those keeping them can falsify details and other members will not know, or simply be a source of mistakes which can lead to failure. Bouman reports fraudulent behaviour by *esusu* heads in Nigeria linked to illiteracy but that once more educated young men took over this was reduced (Bouman, 1995). Studies have established that informal finance groups face challenges because of their informality.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

In spite of policy reforms aiming to expand the formal financial institutions to reach the poor, studies show that majority of the poor continue to use informal finance groups. This is in spite of the financial sector reforms and establishment of micro finance institutions to serve the financial needs of the poor. Studies also indicate that majority of the poor including those living in the informal settlements result to informal saving groups as a result of being excluded from the formal financial institutions. However, empirical studies regarding the gendered challenges of these mechanisms and their implication are scanty. It is also not clear if these informal finance groups are preferred and utilized on the basis of gender. In this context, this study focused on the challenges faced by men and women in informal finance groups. The study was conducted in Gachagi informal settlement area in Thika town Constituency, Kiambu County in Kenya.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The study sought to:

1. Investigate the challenges facing men and women in the informal finance groups.
2. Identify the strategies to address challenges facing men and women in the informal finance groups.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Behavioral Life Cycle Hypothesis advanced by Thaler in 1954 (Thaler & Shefrin, 1988). This model has four key propositions: First, it emphasizes that individuals have difficulty resisting temptations to spend, even when saving money is in their best interests. Secondly, it suggests that individuals create their own incentives or constraints to help them save. Thirdly, that individual classifies economic resources into separate "mental accounts." The temptation to spend resources is expected to vary by account. For example, Thaler (1990) suggest that individuals earmark resources as current income, current assets, or future income and are quite likely to spend money designated as current income and quite unlikely to spend money designated as future income.

Fourthly, Thaler (1990) contend that the source and amount of resources received determines how resources are earmarked. In this context, men and women living in the informal settlement areas earmark their minimal resources into unlimited needs such that the little amount of funds which remain is given out as a contribution in the informal finance group. In relation to the study, the theory explains why the informal finance groups act as an avenue for the men and women and why the policies aiming to achieve finance for all should be scaled up to improve financial savings of the poor especially those living in informal settlement areas.

1.4. Conceptual Framework

Savings for men and women in the informal finance groups is seen to be highly influenced by several challenges such as: delayed payments, mismanagement, poor governance, defaulting, misuse of negotiable principle, and lack of financial knowledge. On the other hand, given the important role of savings whether in the formal or informal institutions and as reviewed by the literature, it is important that practical strategies be put in place to enhance saving. These as emerged in the studies reviewed may include: resource mobilization, government interventions through policy, capacity building and digitization of cash transactions.

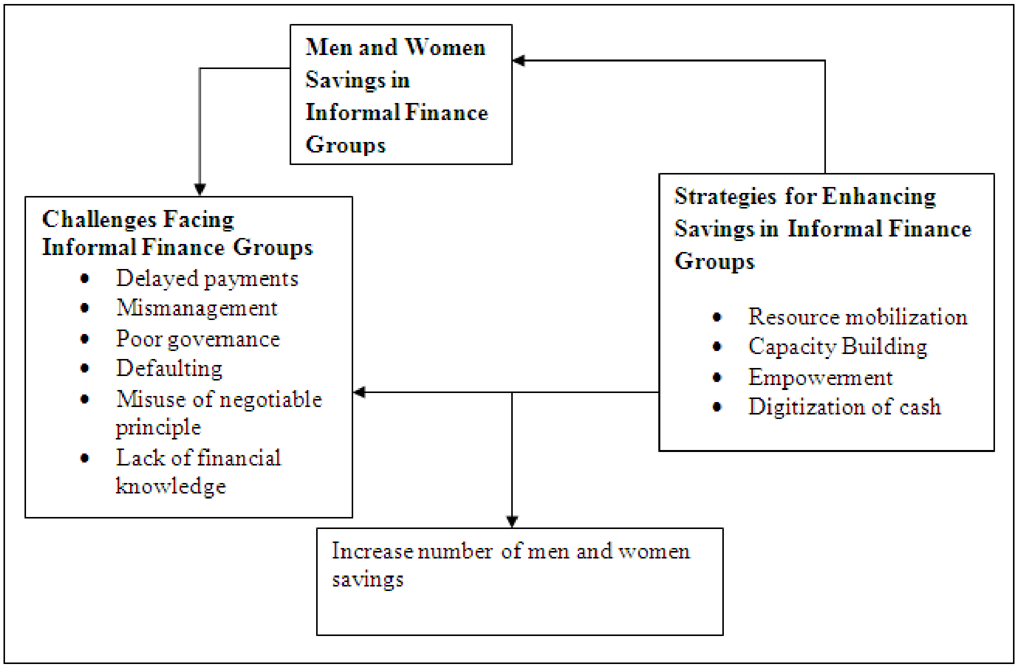

Figure 1: Enhancing savings for men and women in informal finance groups

2. Methodology

The study was carried out in Gachagi informal settlement in Thika Sub-County, Kenya. This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design targeting men and women in the informal finance groups. The design allowed the generation of data in relation to challenges facing men and women in informal finance groups.

The study targeted informal finance groups in the area of study where there were 20 informal finance groups comprising 10 Rotating Saving and Credit Association (ROSCAs), 5 welfare groups, 3 Accumulating Saving and Credit association (ASCAs) and 2 Investment groups. Each informal group had an average of 20 members giving a total of 400. Additionally, the study targeted the Divisional Social Services Officer (DSSO), the Chief and two elders from the informal settlement who provided useful insights into the challenges facing men and women in informal finance groups.

A proportional sample of the informal finance groups was selected as follows: five (5) out of ten (10) ROSCAs, three (3) out of 5 Welfare Groups, 2 out of 3 ASCAs and 1 out of 2 investment groups using simple random sampling technique. This gave a total of 11 informal finance groups representing 55% of the total population. From the sampled informal finance groups, stratified random sampling technique was used to select 12 participants making a total of 42 men and 42 women to form two FGDs for each gender and three for mixed gender. From the 84 members selected, 36 were from ROSCAs, 24 from welfare groups, 12 from investment groups and ASCAs. The number chosen was proportionate to the total number of the men and women from each category. The DSSO, the Chief, the chair person, the treasurer and the secretary from each group and two elders from the informal settlement were included in the sample as key informants.

The study utilized two instruments for data collection, namely Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide for men and women in the selected informal finance groups and interview schedule for the key informants. Data collected was cross-tabulated for qualitative analysis.

3. Findings and Discussions

- Challenges Facing Men and Women in the Informal Finance Groups

The analysis of data yielded two categories of challenges, namely those that affected the groups' operations and those that affected the group members' participation in group activities.

3.1. Challenges that affected the operations of informal finance groups

The most common challenges experienced by informal finance groups in their operations are tabulated in table 1. Poor governance of the groups was the most felt challenge followed by failure to attend group meetings and the least felt challenge being members' conflict.

Challenges	ROSCAs		ASCAs		Welfare		Investment		Total
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	
Poor governance of the group	11	18	3	2	12	9	6	1	62 (74%)
Low attendance of group meetings	5	18	3	5	10	11	4	3	59 (70%)
Defaulting by members	10	21	6	5	7	5	3	1	58 (69%)
Poor book keeping	8	18	3	4	4	9	5	3	54 (64%)
Poor group leadership	7	16	2	5	6	10	4	3	53(63%)
Lack of clear structures to control group operations	13	9	6	3	7	3	8	1	50 (60%)
Members' conflict	10	20	1	2	7	4	1	2	47 (56%)

Table 1: Challenges facing informal finance groups in their operations (multiple responses)

<u>3.1.1. Poor Governance of the Groups</u>

In total, poor governance as a challenge was reported by 74% of the respondents with a frequency of 32 men and 30 women. It was found to have been experienced in all the selected informal finance groups. This was found to be common in ROSCAs, reported by 81% and welfare groups (88%), compared to ASCAs (42%) and investment groups (58%). The findings further revealed that this challenge was common in informal finance groups because of their informality and lack of clear structures and policies to govern group activities. These findings are in line with Siwan et al. (2003) findings on the challenges related to the element of negotiability which enables powerful individuals to manipulate members to their own advantage. Also, a few powerful community members can take advantage of the weak systems where they can quickly set up a group, collect funds from other members, take a big loan for themselves and default to pay and probably vacate from the neighborhood.

<u>3.1.2. Low Attendance of Group Meetings</u>

This was reported by most women (63%) compared to men (37%) from the four categories of informal finance groups. It was also found to be most felt by women because of their multiple gender roles in the family and society that most of the time they were not able to attend group meetings because of their responsibilities as mothers, caregivers and wives. This was confirmed by one woman who asserted that:

"I have not attended two consecutive meetings because my daughter is very sick and requires me to be there for her all the time in order to nurse her."

However, during FGDs it was disclosed that group meetings are important because they ensure members' participation in group activities, promote group cohesion and stability**.**

<u>3.1.3. Defaulting by Members</u>

Defaulting by members was found to be failure by members to repay back the loan advanced or to stop contributing after receiving the *pot*. Defaulting as a challenge was mentioned by 59 members across all the groups, comprising 22 men and 37 women. Additionally, it was mostly felt in ROSCAs and ASCAs at a frequency of 86% and 92% respectively though the impact was the same in the four categories of informal finance groups. It was found that more women defaulted compared to men; this was associated with the fact that women depended on men economically and most of them were involved in unstable menial jobs as their source of income. The interviews disclosed that this challenge was associated with lack of stringent mechanisms to follow up the defaulters.

These findings are in line with the results by Anderson et al. (2004) which describe the problems of contributions faced by ROSCAS in Kibera slum, Kenya which found in particular that those who were late in the order or who had already received the *pot* often failed to pay. Similarly, Siwan et al. (2003) in an extensive field study in Kenya showed that ROSCA groups encounter two main problems: there are members who do not regularly pay their contributions and there are members who stop contributing when receiving the *pot*.

<u>3.1.4. Poor Record Keeping</u>

Poor record keeping was found to constitute missing important group information, lack of minutes supporting major decisions made by the group, lack of books of accounts, wrongly filled books of accounts and untidy books of account or pass book which affected the effectiveness and efficiency of the group in their operations. Data analysis revealed that this challenge was predominantly reported by women at 63%, compared to men (37%) from all informal finance groups. Further data analysis revealed that it is most felt in ROSCAs at 72% as compared to other groups. The findings are in line with Dagnelie and LeMay-Boucher (2008) report which postulates that most premature deaths of ROSCAs are as a result of financial irregularities due to lack of necessary skills in record keeping and financial management.

3.1.5. Poor Group Leadership

Poor group leadership is another challenge which was reported by 53 men and women from all the groups. It was mostly felt in welfare groups at 67% and ROSCAs at 64%. This was confirmed by the Divisional Social Services Officer who reported that most of the informal finance groups collapse because of leadership wrangles. This influences group operations and results into loss of membership, members' dissatisfaction, discontentment and disappointment. These results are in line with findings by Dagnelie and LeMay- Boucher, (2008) that for about 40% of the respondents, the reason was financial irregularities such as irregular payments to the *pot*, members leaving the group early and not willing to continue paying or the groups organiser (president) leaving with the money.

3.1.6. Lack of Clear Structures to Guide Group Operations

Data analysis revealed that lack of clear structures to guide group operations was one of the challenges reported by 50 men and women from informal finance groups. It was equally felt by men and women across all the informal finance groups. The findings revealed that lack of clear structures was closely associated with failure to register groups as it is required by the government through the Department of Social Services. It was found that this resulted in failure to recover the money lost and the inability to enforce payment of fines/penalties charged on defaulters and late payments leading loss of money and group membership. Data analysis further showed that this challenge was most felt in ASCAs, welfare and investment groups; significantly these groups predominantly had more men than women. The findings revealed that more men (68%) compared to women (32%) felt that their groups lacked structures to control the group activities. These findings supports Bouman (1995) who reported the role of social relations of gender, kinship and age as factors which can result into problems of default and abuse due to lack of clear structures. Lack of structures was also depicted in a detailed case study of a *tanda* in Mexico. Velez-Ibanez shows how misunderstandings and dissatisfaction regarding the motivation of the organizer in negotiating the order of ROSCA payout resulted in one of the organizer's friends deciding to default after he had received the payout. The friend was able to use a threat of revealing aspects of the organizer's behavior that would damage his reputation with other members to conceal the fact and consequently the organizer paid on behalf of the friend (Velez-Ibanez, 1983).

3.1.7. Members' Conflict

Members' conflict was the least felt challenge having been reported by 47 members comprising of 20 men and 27 women. The FGDs revealed that these conflicts were related with group fund management, group coordination, failure to pay back the loans, wasteful competition, jealousy and disagreements in decision making. This affected group cohesiveness and membership trust resulting in group instability and finally collapse. The findings disclosed that this challenge was mostly felt in ROSCAs groups (83%) compared to other informal finance groups. This concurs with a similar study by Anderson et al. (2004) which found that the less formal ROSCAs were found to have more conflicts than the more formal ROSCAs, because the loose structure allows more negotiations e.g. on who should get the *pot* and when. Similarly, Anderson and Baland (2002) found that jealousy and rivalries also come up in ethnically homogeneous groups.

3.2. Challenges influencing effective participation of men and women in informal finance groups

The findings revealed that men and women in informal finance groups experienced three main challenges namely: poverty, gender roles and gender relations. The challenges are tabulated with poverty being the most felt with a frequency of 76 followed by gender roles at 55 while the least felt challenge was unequal gender relations at 51 as shown in table.2.

Challenges	**ROSCAS**		**ASCAS**		**Welfare**		**Investment**		
	M	**W**	**M**	**W**	**M**	**W**	**M**	**W**	**Total**
Low income	12	21	5	5	13	11	6	3	76 (90%)
Burdensome gender roles	5	22	2	4	7	11	2	2	55 (65%)
Unequal gender relations	6	20	2	5	5	10	1	2	51 (61%)

Table 2: Challenges influencing effective contribution of men and women in informal finance group (Multiple responses)

Further analysis revealed specific issues surrounding each challenge as discussed:

3.2.1. Low Income

Low income was raised as a major challenge by 76 members comprising 40 women and 36 men from all the informal finance groups with a frequency of above 70% in all categories of informal finance groups. Further data analysis revealed that poverty was more dominant amongst women (53%) compared to men (47%). The FGDs revealed that this trend was associated with low economic status of men and women resulting into lack of money for contributions and delayed payments. During the interviews, the elders reported high levels of poverty as a result of irregular and unpredictable sources of income with the majority not able to provide enough to sustain daily needs for their families. The findings support the argument by Karlan et al. (2004) that poor people have multiple demands on their scant resources. As such, they normally save for specific time and purposes mainly in situations that motivate them to save more. Field surveys reveal that they prefer small regular contributions that are collected at their doorstep (Karlan et al. 2004).

3.2.2. Burdensome Gender Roles

This was explained as the multitude gender roles and responsibilities assigned to women in the family and the community. The FGDs revealed that this influenced the attendance of group meetings and group contributions. The findings were reported by 64 members comprising of 37 women and 27 men. It was mostly reported in ROSCAs and welfare groups with 75% confirming this. Further data analysis revealed that it was mostly reported by women (71%) compared to men (29%) because as it was found, women were overburdened in relation to roles and responsibilities they undertake at the family and community levels. In relation to contributions, it was found that most of the women in Gachagi informal settlement earned little amounts of money. It was reported that most women (54%) earned less than KES 3,000 which was irregular and was shared between household needs and group contributions, which sometimes resulted into delayed/ failure of group contributions. The FGDs further revealed that this was common among women because most of them were mainly engaged in reproductive rather productive gender roles. The findings support United Nations (2013) report that women in developing regions are more likely than men to work as contributing family workers on farms or other family business enterprises with little or no financial security and social benefits

3.2.3. Unequal Gender Relations

Unequal gender relations was explained as the unequal gender power relations between men and women in the family and society which influences group membership, savings, contributions, loans repayment and meeting attendance. It is associated with who has access and control of resources in the society which influences the decision making process in the society. This challenge predominantly affected women as reported by 57%, a fact that could be attributed to the subordinate position they occupy in the society (Kanyi & Kimani, 2014). Unequal gender relations as a challenge was mostly felt by 51% of ROSCAs members, whose majority were women, compared to other group categories. The findings support United Nations (2013) report that increasing women's decision- making power is not limited to their role in parliaments. Whether it is in the public or private sphere, women continue to be denied opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their lives. The suppression of women's voices in many spheres, whether deliberate or resulting from long standing discriminatory, social and cultural norms, contributes to persistence of gender inequality.

3.3. Strategies to Address Challenges Facing Men and Women in the Informal Finance Groups

Data analysis revealed that there were five identified strategies with capacity building being the most suggested while integrating informal finance groups into formal financial institutions having the least frequency.

3.3.1. Capacity Building of Informal Finance Group Members

Capacity building of informal finance group members as a strategy was predominantly suggested by women and men from the four informal finance groups. Capacity building as suggested by the respondents was to be in form of training through workshops and seminars. It was found that men and women felt that training should focus on resource mobilization, empowerment, leadership, financial management and simple book keeping skills. This was in line with the findings by Akinrinola & Mafiisebi (2009), whose study reported that one way of improving informal finance groups is through re-enforcing and capacity building. Since the low income earners are credit constrained, a well funded informal credit institution with good management practices will provide the needed fund for the poor to embark on sustainable income generating ventures and adequate training would trigger entrepreneurship spirit and effective management.

3.3.2. Mechanisms to Enforce Group Registration

The findings revealed that 64% of groups were not registered even though it is a government requirement through the Department of Social Services. The FGDs revealed that a significant number (64) of members comprising 40 men and 24 women from the four categories of informal finance groups recommended that the national and county governments should come up with some mechanisms for enforcing group registration. Enforcing group registration mechanisms was mostly suggested by ASCAs and investment groups with 92% each, The ASCAs suggested penalties/ fines while the investment group suggested stringent rules and measures to be formulated to enforce group registration. During FGDs, it was revealed that majority of men at 63% recommended this strategy. These results concurred with the report by FinAccess, (2009) which revealed that although welfare groups are referred to as 'informal groups,' 46% have a certificate of registration which would normally be with the Ministry of Culture and Social Services and is necessary in order to hold a bank account.

3.3.3. Formulation of Government Policies on Financial Accessibility to the Poor

The findings revealed that 53 members comprising 33 men and 20 women suggested that the national and county governments should formulate policies meant to enhance financial accessibility for all. During FGDs, they suggested that the financial policies should be focused on ensuring financial institutions adopt flexible financial rules, offer low interest rates on loans borrowed, reduce the minimum amount to be borrowed as a loan to accommodate the financial needs of the poor and minimize the bureaucracy which is characteristic of financial institutions. To enhance their savings; specifically, women and men who favored this strategy suggested that financial policies should be focused on improving financial security of the poor by regulating informal finance groups through an Act of Parliament in relation to how they are operated or a by-law at the county level to oversee their operations. About 50% of those who suggested this strategy were emphatic that it should be tailored towards financial accessibility for the poor and illiterate in the society. This analysis further revealed that the strategy was supported by more men (62%) compared to women (38%). These findings are in line with Akinrinola & Mafiisebi (2009) which stated that any policy or intervention approach that leads to increase in income, vis-a-vis savings for the poor has greater propensity to reduce poverty scale and dwarf the inequality gap.

3.3.4. Integrating Informal Groups into Formal Financial Sector

Integrating informal finance groups into financial sector was another strategy which was suggested by 41 members out of which 61% were women while 39% were men. It was mostly suggested by ASCAs group members at 67%. The study found that this strategy could be achieved through collaborating and linking the groups with formal finance providers such as banks and micro finance institutions. As it was noted by Aryeetey (1994), it is possible to link the advantages of both formal and informal segments to overcome the gaps in the financial markets. The linkage between the formal and informal linkage was also suggested by Seibel (2007), who observed that commercial banks for example may provide on-lending facilities to informal lenders. Banks may link up with the informal groups which will distribute or collect funds, or act as a guarantor for credit security through collective responsibility or peer monitoring (Seibel, 2007).

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that men and women in Gachagi informal settlement face various challenges in informal finance groups. Key among them was poor governance, low attendance of group meetings, defaulting by members and burdensome gender roles among others. The study predominantly noted the high level of illiteracy and low levels of economic empowerment for the men and women, hence the need to build their capacity through training and empowerment.

5. Recommendations

a) The Department of Social Services and formal financial providers should undertake awareness campaigns safe keeping of money, use of formal financial institutions and important of group registration among others.

b) The government, through the Department of Social Services and formal financial institutions should provide capacity building trainings on effective group leadership, simple record keeping and financial management skills.

c) The county government of Kiambu in collaboration with local organizations through the guidance of gender experts should develop training programmes on issues of gender balance with emphasis on practical gender needs of women which limits their benefits from the groups.

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