

Constraining Factors for the Empowerment of Rural Women and their Impact on Entrepreneurship Development

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Abstract

This research addresses the social and economic inequality that affects the women of the Agropaz association in Paz de Río, Boyacá, manifested in their lack of control over their lives, limitations in decision making and restricted access to resources and opportunities. The study focuses on identifying the factors that restrict their empowerment and, therefore, their capacity to undertake and manage productive projects that improve their living conditions. Using a qualitative approach and a participatory action research design, the study seeks to characterize the level of empowerment of these rural women and develop guidelines to promote their social and economic inclusion. Technical training in educational workshops will not only provide essential knowledge for the management of agricultural enterprises, but is also considered a fundamental tool for achieving effective empowerment that will enable Agropaz women to significantly improve their quality of life and guarantee a sustainable impact on their communities.

Keywords: Barriers to Empowerment, Rural Context, Gender Inequality, Female Empowerment.

1. Introduction

The empowerment of rural women has gained increasing relevance in the global development agenda since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly with regard to the fight against poverty and inequality. Recent literature highlights that women in rural areas face structural barriers that limit their access to economic and social resources, which in turn affects their ability to fully participate in community life, make decisions, and undertake economic initiatives (Kabeer, 2018; Cornwall, 2019). These barriers, which include inequality in the distribution of productive resources, lack of access to education and training, and exclusion from support networks, not only perpetuate poverty, but also restrict rural women's ability to manage ventures that could improve their living conditions (Agarwal, 2020).

In Colombia, the situation of rural women reflects these global trends. Recent studies suggest that rural women in regions such as Boyacá face adverse conditions that perpetuate inequality and hinder their access to development opportunities, including entrepreneurship (Maldonado et al., 2021). The lack of control over their lives and limited participation in decision-making are critical aspects that not only inhibit their empowerment, but also limit their ability to lead and manage productive projects that could contribute significantly to their economic and social well-being. According to the ECLAC report (2019), the economic and social empowerment of rural women is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty in rural areas; however, this process is hindered by the persistence of patriarchal norms and the insufficiency of effective public policies, which in turn restrict entrepreneurial possibilities.

This study focuses on the Agropaz association, located in the municipality of Paz de Río, Boyacá, where women have been historically marginalized in local development processes, which has limited their capacity to undertake and manage economic initiatives. Through a participatory action research approach, we seek to identify the restrictive factors that limit both the empowerment and entrepreneurship of these women, and to formulate strategies that promote their effective inclusion in the local economy. The methodological design adopted allows not only to diagnose the current situation, but also to intervene directly in the improvement of the living conditions of the participants, facilitating their capacity to lead productive projects. This research is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals that promote gender equality and poverty eradication, highlighting the need to address the structural inequalities that affect rural women and their entrepreneurial possibilities in specific contexts such as Agropaz (UN, 2020).

2. Literature Review

The analysis of female empowerment in rural contexts has attracted increasing interest in the academic literature, given its importance in promoting sustainable development, reducing poverty and strengthening entrepreneurship. Over the last few years, several studies have explored the factors that influence rural women's ability to access resources, actively participate in decisions that affect their lives and communities, and lead entrepreneurial initiatives that promote their economic autonomy. This section reviews the main theoretical and empirical contributions on the topic, emphasizing both the relevance of rural women's empowerment and effective strategies to overcome the barriers that limit their entrepreneurial capacity. The literature review allows contextualizing the study within the broader framework of research on gender, empowerment, rural development and the role of entrepreneurship as a driver of change in these contexts.

Relevance of Rural Women's Empowerment

The empowerment of rural women has been recognized as a fundamental component for sustainable development and poverty reduction in these contexts. Academic literature has emphasized that women's active participation in decision making and access to economic and social resources are essential for improving living conditions in rural communities (Agarwal, 2018; Kabeer, 2019). This empowerment not only promotes gender equity, but also has a positive impact on agricultural productivity, food security, and the well-being of rural families and

communities (Doss et al., 2020). In addition, empowerment is essential for rural women to develop the capacity to manage enterprises, particularly in the area of agricultural projects, which allows them to improve their quality of life and that of their communities.

The relevance of female empowerment in rural areas is directly related to women's ability to access and participate in the management of productive resources. According to recent studies, rural women face significant barriers in terms of access to land, credit, and technology, which limit their ability to fully contribute to the economic development of their communities (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). These constraints not only perpetuate gender inequality and exacerbate poverty in rural households, but also hinder the emergence of women-led entrepreneurial initiatives, which could be a key driver of sustainable local development (Peterman et al., 2021).

Economic empowerment of rural women is essential to break the cycle of poverty in rural communities. The ability to generate their own income and access competitive markets allows women to improve their position within their households and communities, thus promoting gender equity and sustainable economic development (Quisumbing and Pandolfelli, 2019). In this context, entrepreneurship presents itself as a fundamental strategy, as empowered women can lead and manage agricultural projects that not only generate income, but also contribute to food security and the overall well-being of the community. Research has also shown that rural women's economic empowerment is closely related to improvements in the nutrition and health of household members, further reinforcing the importance of this process for rural development (Sraboni et al., 2018).

Several strategies have been identified as effective in overcoming the barriers faced by rural women on their path to empowerment. Among them, training in agricultural and non-agricultural skills, access to microcredit, and the formation of support networks and cooperatives have shown positive results in several studies (Nazneen et al., 2020; van den Bold et al., 2019). These interventions not only increase women's economic capability, but also strengthen their confidence and decision-making capacity (Johnson et al., 2018). These skills and resources are critical for rural women to successfully undertake and manage productive projects, particularly in agriculture, where entrepreneurship can be a catalyst for sustainable development in marginalized communities.

Interventions that integrate a gender approach into the design and implementation of rural development programs have been particularly successful in empowering rural women. According to Kabeer (2019), these interventions must consider the social and cultural norms that limit women's participation in the economic and social life of their communities. By addressing these norms in a comprehensive manner, empowerment programs not only generate sustainable changes and transform gender dynamics in rural areas, but also create an enabling environment for women to develop and manage ventures that improve their quality of life and contribute to local development (Mahmud et al., 2020). The inclusion of an entrepreneurship approach in these interventions allows rural women to access new economic and productive opportunities, which strengthens their capacity to actively participate in the economy and lead productive projects in their communities.

In addition, education and access to information have been identified as critical factors in the process of empowering rural women. Literacy and formal education not only increase women's economic opportunities, but also enable them to participate more effectively in community decision making and advocacy (Malapit et al., 2019). In particular, access to financial education and business management training is critical to rural women's ability to undertake and sustain agricultural and other enterprises, connecting them to broader markets and essential financial resources (Galiè et al., 2020). Access to information, especially through digital technologies, has proven to be a powerful tool not only for connecting to resources and markets, but also for creating support networks that are vital to the success of rural enterprises.

In the context of Latin America, the empowerment of rural women has been promoted through public policies that seek to reduce the gender gap in access to productive resources and strengthen women's organizational capacities. Initiatives such as Farmer Field Schools (FFS) and capacity building programs have been effective in several countries in the region, demonstrating that technical training and strengthening of women's organizations can lead to substantial improvements in gender equity and rural development (FAO, 2019; Deere and León, 2020). These programs have not only improved gender equity, but have also facilitated the development of women-led entrepreneurship, which in turn contributes to sustainable economic development in their communities.

However, despite the progress made, significant challenges persist that limit the empowerment of rural women. Patriarchal norms, gender-based violence, and lack of access to basic services remain major barriers that require continued attention and a multidimensional approach to overcome (Doss et al., 2020). It is critical that rural women's empowerment policies and programs continue to evolve and adapt to the changing realities of rural communities, including a more robust focus on entrepreneurship development that enables rural women to improve their economic position and exert meaningful control over their lives and resources (Nazneen et al., 2020).

Broadly speaking, the empowerment of rural women is a complex and multifaceted process that has a profound impact on the development of ventures for the sustainable development of rural communities. The literature highlights the need for comprehensive approaches that address both structural and cultural barriers faced by rural women. By promoting access to resources, education and participation in decision making, significant advances in gender equity and the well-being of rural communities can be achieved.

3. Materials and Methods

This study is part of the qualitative approach, with the objective of identifying the factors that limit the empowerment of rural women from a perspective based on the arguments and appreciations of the women who are part of the Agropaz association. Hamilton and Finley (2019) argue that qualitative research facilitates an in-depth exploration of specific experiences and contexts, which allows for a comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena, such as female empowerment in rural contexts.

In relation to the scope of the research, a descriptive approach has been adopted to examine in a detailed and systematic manner the critical elements that constrain rural women's empowerment. Doyle et al. (2020) argue that the descriptive method is particularly suited to provide a rich and detailed account of the characteristics and conditions that shape the phenomenon under study, allowing for an accurate representation of reality as it manifests itself in its natural context.

The design of this study is based on Participatory Action Research (PAR), a methodological approach that not only seeks to understand social phenomena, but also to promote significant changes through the active participation of the subjects involved. PRA is particularly appropriate for this study, as it allows rural women not only to be objects of study, but also agents of transformation in their own context. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2018), PRA facilitates a collaborative process where participants are involved in identifying problems, making decisions, and implementing solutions, which strengthens their empowerment and capacity to influence their social and economic environment. This approach is relevant for addressing the barriers that limit rural women's empowerment, as it fosters active and reflective participation that can lead to sustainable and contextually relevant changes.

Unit of Study

For this research, it was decided to focus the study on a specific group of rural women belonging to the Agropaz association, located in the village of Carichana, El Portillo sector, in the municipality of Paz de Río, Boyacá, Colombia. The study population is made up of 22 women members of this association.

The sample was selected purposively, using an approach that includes all participants who meet the following inclusion criteria: residence in the village, affiliation to the association, low income, unemployment, responsibility as head of household, and willingness to actively collaborate in the research.

This purposive sampling method, as Otzen and Manterola (2017) point out, allows the researcher to choose the cases that are most convenient for the study, while ensuring the accessibility and proximity necessary to conduct the research effectively.

Study Categories

In line with the qualitative approach and the Participatory Action Research (PAR) design adopted in this study, data collection techniques that are consistent with the qualitative nature of the research have been employed. Specifically, focus groups have been used as the main tool, which allowed us to capture in depth the opinions, arguments and perceptions of the rural women who make up the study unit.

The implementation of this collection technique was oriented towards the identification and understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants regarding their empowerment, within the specific context of the Agropaz association. To process and analyze the data obtained, open, axial and selective coding was used, using the qualitative research software Atlas.TI 7.0. This methodological approach made it possible to structure and configure the different study categories, facilitating the identification of the factors that restrict the empowerment of rural women in the association.

This analytical process sought not only to classify and organize the information collected, but also to provide a solid basis for understanding the underlying dynamics that limit the integral development and autonomy of these women in their rural context.

Stages of the Research Process

The research process for this study was structured in three fundamental phases, each designed to meet the specific research objectives.

- First Phase: This initial phase was dedicated to the collection of perceptions of rural women of the Agropaz association through a focus group. The main objective was to identify and understand the factors and barriers that have limited the empowerment and entrepreneurship of these women. Through this methodology, we sought to obtain a detailed vision of the challenges faced by the participants in their specific context.
- Second Phase: Based on the results obtained in the first phase, an action plan was designed to address the problems identified. This plan focused on directly addressing the factors that have impeded the empowerment and development of entrepreneurship by rural women in the community studied. The proposed strategy aimed to provide concrete and practical solutions that could improve conditions and opportunities for the participants.
- Third Phase: In this final stage, a discussion of the findings obtained in the previous phases was carried out. Reflection focused on how the factors identified affect the empowerment and entrepreneurship of rural women, as well as on the implications and recommendations derived from the research. Limitations encountered during the study were addressed and the proposed action plan was reviewed. In addition, areas for future research were identified, highlighting the need to develop strategies and policies that effectively address the constraining factors discovered.

4. Results

The results of the study are directly linked to the established objectives and the phases of the research process.

- Results stage one - Characterization of the empowerment of rural women of the Agropaz Association.

To address the first objective of the research, a focus group was administered to the 22 women members of the Agropaz association, with the purpose of identifying the factors or barriers that have negatively influenced their empowerment. This qualitative technique made it possible to gather detailed opinions, perceptions and experiences of the participants. The data collected from the focus group were analyzed using the qualitative research software Atlas.Ti 7.0, facilitating the emerging categorization of the main barriers that limit women's empowerment in the context studied. The following are the study categories derived from this analysis, which are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Emerging categories focus group administered

Category	Subcategory	Dimension	Indicators
Access to education for rural women	Access to formal education	Level of educational access	- Literacy rate - Educational level achieved - Participation in educational programs
	Educational barriers	Obstacles to access	- Availability of educational institutions - Associated costs - Distance to educational centers
Gender inequality	Gender role in the community	Perception of gender equality	- Opinions on equality - Distribution of responsibilities in the household - Participation in community activities
	Cultural norms and practices	Discriminatory practices	- Presence of restrictive rules - Traditional discriminatory practices - Gender representation in community leadership
Lack of access to economic resources	Access to financing	Availability of financial resources	- Access to credit - Number of subsidies received - Loan conditions
	Productive resources	Availability and quality of resources	- Access to land - Access to equipment and tools - Quality and quantity of inputs
Lack of participation in decision making	Participation in community processes	Inclusion in decision making	- Level of participation in meetings - Influence on community decisions - Representation on committees or boards
	Barriers to participation	Obstacles to participation	- Cultural constraints - Structural barriers - Lack of institutional or community support

Note: The table details the emerging categories after the analysis of the opinions provided by the informants in the focus group.

- Category Access to Education

Rural women in the Agropaz Association face numerous challenges in terms of access to education, a problem that manifests itself in various dimensions. Focus group participants highlighted the lack of adequate educational infrastructure in their communities, the scarcity of educational resources, and logistical barriers that limit their ability to access training programs. These difficulties, aggravated by geographic isolation and lack of adequate transportation, not only restrict their educational opportunities, but also have a direct impact on their ability to develop enterprises that could improve their quality of life through the relevant management of agricultural projects.

This scenario is in line with previous studies that highlight how limitations in infrastructure and resources affect access to education in rural areas. According to Khan (2022), physical and logistical barriers are often determinants in the educational exclusion of rural women, who face additional difficulties due to their remote location. In addition, Mahai's (2023) research confirms that lack of transportation and distance to educational centers contribute significantly to the low educational participation of women in rural areas, which in turn limits their ability to acquire the necessary skills for entrepreneurship. Therefore, insufficient infrastructure and logistical barriers

are not only considered critical factors that need to be addressed to improve access to education, but are also obstacles to the development of productive enterprises.

Some significant responses provided by the women who participated in the focus group illustrate this reality:

- M1PG: “We don't have schools nearby and transportation is very expensive. Sometimes, our children can't go to school because there is no way for them to get there.” This response reflects not only the problem of distance and the cost of transportation, which prevents women and their families from accessing education, but also the inability of these women to access training that could enable them to manage their own agricultural enterprises.
- M12PG: “Although we want to learn more and improve our skills, resources in schools are very limited. There are not enough materials for everyone.” This observation highlights the lack of educational resources, a barrier documented in the literature, and which also translates into a limitation in acquiring knowledge necessary for entrepreneurship, reducing their ability to efficiently manage projects that could improve their income and quality of life.
- M9PG: “Sometimes we are informed about courses or workshops, but they are far away and we can't go. We would like to have more options closer to our homes.” This statement underscores the lack of local educational opportunities, which limits access to continuing education. Without this training, rural women lack the tools necessary to develop successful ventures, such as agricultural project management, which could be critical to the economic development of their communities.
- M14PG: “The few times we have had access to courses, the schedules don't fit our daily responsibilities. It is difficult to combine it with work in the field.” This response highlights not only the problems of reconciling work responsibilities and educational opportunities, but also how this lack of flexibility prevents rural women from acquiring the necessary skills to undertake farming.

The findings of the focus group show that access to education for rural women in the Agropaz Association is conditioned by logistical factors, infrastructure and limited resources. These factors not only restrict their overall empowerment, but also limit their capacity for entrepreneurship, especially in areas such as the management of agricultural projects that could significantly improve their quality of life.

Contrasting the results of this category with the existing literature reveals a consistent pattern in which physical barriers and lack of resources are significant obstacles not only to education in rural areas, but also to entrepreneurship. Reflecting on these findings, it is clear that in order to improve access to education and entrepreneurship in rural communities, it is critical to address these problems from a holistic perspective. Solutions must be implemented that not only improve educational infrastructure and access to transportation, but also consider the creation of adequate educational resources, the adaptation of training programs to local realities, and the strengthening of rural women's entrepreneurial capacities. This analysis underscores the need for effective policies and strategies to address these issues in a comprehensive and sustained manner in order

to empower rural women and facilitate their participation in the economic development of their communities.

Category gender inequality

Gender inequality continues to be a determining factor limiting both the empowerment and capacity of rural women to consolidate entrepreneurship. Deeply rooted cultural norms and practices in the rural community of Asociación Agropaz perpetuate gender roles that restrict women's opportunities to participate actively in economic and social life.

One of the most salient aspects of this analysis is the gender role in the community. Focus group participants indicated that, despite some progress in the perception of gender equality, views on equality remain unfavorable for women. These perceptions are reflected in the distribution of responsibilities in the household, where women assume most of the household chores and care for the family, which significantly limits their time and energy to engage in entrepreneurial activities.

Previous studies have pointed out that this disproportionate burden of household responsibilities is a critical barrier to rural women's empowerment.

According to Dewi and Pratama (2021), the unequal distribution of household chores is a key factor that restricts women's opportunities to engage in productive and income-generating activities. This aligns with research by Odunaike and Ajiboye (2020), which highlights how lack of time and resources, resulting from domestic responsibilities, limits women's ability to develop sustainable ventures.

This is consistent with the opinion of the women participating in the focus group, which reflects this reality:

- M3PG: "We do everything in the house, while the men are busy working in the fields. There is no time to think about our own projects or learn something new." This response underscores how the unequal distribution of household tasks prevents women from developing entrepreneurial initiatives that could improve their living conditions.
- M8PG: "Although there is talk of equality, in practice we women are still the ones in charge of the house and the children. We don't have time to participate in meetings or courses that could help us start something of our own." This statement evidences the perception of gender equality as a concept still far away in daily practice, affecting the possibility for women to engage in entrepreneurship.
- M11PG: "Here, women do not usually participate in community decisions. Men are the ones who have a say in what is done or not done." This observation reflects the low participation of women in community activities, which in turn limits their access to support networks and resources that could be crucial for venture development.

The impact of cultural norms and practices is also evident in the way rural women experience discriminatory practices. The presence of restrictive norms and traditional discriminatory practices perpetuate a cycle of exclusion that prevents women from accessing training opportunities, financing and support for their enterprises. Focus group participants expressed

how these practices affect their ability to assume leadership roles in their communities, which is essential to consolidate any entrepreneurial initiative.

The findings derived from the analysis of this category show that gender inequality in the rural community of the Agropaz Association directly and indirectly affects women's ability to undertake and consolidate projects that improve their quality of life. The combination of a disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities, limited participation in community activities and discriminatory cultural practices prevent women from accessing the opportunities and resources necessary for entrepreneurship.

Category Lack of access to economic resources

Lack of access to economic resources continues to be one of the most significant barriers faced by rural women in the Agropaz Association for the development of sustainable enterprises. Limitations in access to financing, together with the scarcity of productive resources, have hindered women's ability to initiate and maintain entrepreneurial activities.

Regarding access to financing, the focus group participants expressed that opportunities for obtaining credit are extremely limited. M7PG mentioned, "It is very difficult to get credit, and when we do get it, the conditions are very hard. The interest rates are high, and if we don't pay on time, we lose everything." This situation aligns with what is pointed out by Kabeer (2019), who highlights that women in rural contexts often face significant obstacles in accessing financing due to high interest rates and unfavorable credit conditions. This limited access to credit restricts women's ability to invest in their projects, which in turn limits the growth and sustainability of their ventures (Buvinić and O'Donnell, 2019).

The availability of productive resources, such as land, equipment and tools, also represents a considerable challenge. M10PG noted, "We don't have access to good land or the necessary equipment to work it. Sometimes, we can't even buy basic inputs because they are very expensive." This testimony is consistent with research by Agarwal (2018), who identifies that rural women often have limited access to essential productive resources, leaving them at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts in terms of productive capacity and income generation. Lack of access to these critical resources not only impedes the expansion of existing ventures, but also discourages women from initiating new projects (FAO, 2019).

The combination of these financial and productive barriers creates an environment in which rural women find it very difficult to consolidate their enterprises. Without the necessary resources, their initiatives are limited in scope and potential, directly affecting their ability to improve their quality of life through entrepreneurship. As Galiè et al. (2020) argue, lack of access to economic resources not only limits women's opportunities to engage in economic activities, but also perpetuates gender inequalities in rural contexts.

Category Lack of Participation in Decision Making

The lack of participation of rural women in decision-making within their communities is a significant barrier that affects not only their empowerment, but also the possibility of developing successful enterprises. The low inclusion of women in community processes and the presence of

structural and cultural barriers limit their ability to influence decisions that directly affect their projects and the economic development of their communities.

Participation in community processes: The women of the Agropaz Association expressed that although they attend community meetings, their level of participation and influence on decisions is minimal. M3PG commented, “We are invited to meetings, but our opinions are almost never taken into account. The men always decide for us.” This lack of inclusion in decision-making is consistent with Cornwall (2019), who argues that the exclusion of women in decision-making processes is one of the most prevalent forms of gender discrimination in rural communities, which restricts their ability to promote and manage entrepreneurial initiatives. As a result, women lack the authority to implement changes or strategies that could benefit their ventures (Kabeer, 2019).

Barriers to participation: Cultural constraints and structural barriers also play a crucial role in limiting female participation. M8PG noted, “In our culture, women are expected to stay at home. Even when we want to participate, we are not allowed to participate.” This testimony is consistent with the research of Agarwal (2018), who identifies that restrictive cultural norms and structural barriers, such as lack of institutional support, significantly limit women's participation in public and economic life. This exclusion reduces their opportunities to influence decisions that could facilitate access to resources, funding, and training for their ventures (Azis et al., 2023).

Lack of institutional or community support is another critical obstacle. M11PG mentioned, “We don't have any support from local authorities. When we try to do something, there are always bureaucratic hurdles or they just don't pay attention to us.” This type of structural barrier reinforces the marginalization of women in decision-making processes, limiting their ability to develop and consolidate ventures that could improve their quality of life. According to Quisumbing and Pandolfelli (2010), the lack of institutional support is a factor that perpetuates gender inequality and restricts economic opportunities for rural women.

In general terms, the limited participation of rural women in decision-making within their communities has a direct negative impact on their ability to consolidate enterprises. The lack of influence in community decisions, together with cultural and structural barriers, restricts their access to necessary resources and reduces the chances of success of their entrepreneurial initiatives. As noted by Haug et al., (2017), the inclusion of women in decision-making processes is essential for the sustainable development of their ventures and for improving their overall well-being.

- Results Stage Two: Action Plan to Overcome the Constraints to Rural Women's Empowerment

Based on the findings of the first stage of the study, a comprehensive action plan was designed to address the barriers identified around access to education, gender inequality, lack of economic resources and limited participation in decision-making. This plan aims to promote empowerment and the development of agricultural enterprises among rural women who are part of the Agropaz association, thus improving their quality of life and contributing to the sustainable development of their communities.

First, a significant improvement in access to education and training for rural women is proposed. This includes the implementation of tailored educational programs that respond to the specific needs of this group, such as literacy, basic education and technical training in agricultural and entrepreneurial areas. In addition, it is suggested that non-formal education be strengthened through workshops and short courses focused on practical skills, resource management and leadership, accompanied by training in personal and collective empowerment. This approach will enable women to acquire knowledge and tools that will facilitate the creation and management of their own enterprises.

On the other hand, it is essential to promote gender equality and change cultural norms that perpetuate discrimination in the community. To this end, it is proposed to implement awareness campaigns that involve all members of the community, including men and youth, in order to foster a shared understanding of the importance of gender equality. In addition, it is suggested that female leadership be strengthened through mentoring and training programs, thus ensuring greater representation and participation of women in leadership roles within the community. This will contribute to women having a stronger voice in making decisions that affect both their lives and the development of their enterprises.

Improving access to economic resources is another fundamental pillar of this action plan. It is necessary to facilitate access to financing through the creation of mechanisms adapted to the needs of rural women, such as microcredits, revolving funds and specific subsidies. These financial instruments must be accessible, flexible and tailored to the economic realities of this group, which will ensure their viability and sustainability. In addition, it is essential to establish programs that ensure the equitable distribution of productive resources, such as land, equipment and agricultural tools, accompanied by technical assistance for their effective use. In this way, women will be able to maximize their productive capacity and develop successful agricultural enterprises.

Finally, it is essential to increase women's participation in decision-making, both at the community and institutional levels. To achieve this, it is recommended that local policies be developed to promote the inclusion of women in decision-making processes, creating formal spaces where they can express their opinions and contribute in a meaningful way. At the same time, work must be done to eliminate structural barriers that limit their participation, such as discriminatory practices and the lack of adequate infrastructure. Institutional and community support will be key to ensuring that women have the opportunities and support necessary to become actively involved in the public and economic life of their communities.

This action plan, built on an analysis of the identified constraining factors, seeks to be implemented in a participatory manner, involving rural women and other key stakeholders. Its comprehensive and strategic approach is designed not only to empower women, but also to create an enabling environment that facilitates their active participation in the economic and social development of their communities.

Results stage three: Reflection

In the final phase of the study, a focus group was held with the 22 rural women of the Agropaz association to discuss the findings obtained in the previous phases and reflect on the proposed

action plan. The objective was to obtain direct feedback from the participants on the feasibility and effectiveness of the plan, as well as to identify possible improvements and areas for future attention.

During the discussion, the women expressed a positive reception to the socialized action plan. They noted that the proposed strategies directly addressed many of the challenges they face in their daily lives, particularly with regard to access to education and economic resources. Several participants noted that the proposals to improve literacy and technical education would be of great help in increasing their skills and capacities, which is critical to the development of their enterprises. Likewise, the possibility of accessing financing through microcredit and revolving funds was received with enthusiasm, as they recognize that the lack of financial resources has been one of the main obstacles to the growth of their projects.

However, the focus group also identified some negative aspects and areas for improvement of the action plan. Some women expressed concerns about the effective implementation of the strategies, especially with regard to community participation and changing cultural norms. They noted that while awareness campaigns and leadership trainings are critical, they could face significant resistance from other community members, particularly men, which could limit the impact of the plan. In addition, it was mentioned that structural barriers, such as lack of adequate infrastructure and distance to training centers, could hinder continued and effective participation in the proposed educational programs.

The participants also suggested some improvements to the action plan. For example, they recommended including more training sessions on soft skills, such as negotiation and conflict resolution, as they believe these skills are crucial to overcome difficulties in their daily interactions and to strengthen their leadership capacity. They also proposed seeking partnerships with local and international organizations that can provide additional technical and financial support, which could improve the long-term sustainability of the ventures they are developing.

Finally, the discussion highlighted the importance of continuing to research and develop strategies that adapt to the changing needs of rural women. Participants emphasized that it is necessary to constantly monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions to ensure that empowerment and economic development objectives are being achieved. They also suggested that future research should focus on exploring new forms of community collaboration and the creation of support networks among women entrepreneurs, which could further enhance the positive outcomes of the action plan.

In a broad sense, the focus group revealed a mostly positive assessment of the action plan, with women recognizing its potential to improve their living conditions and strengthen their enterprises. However, challenges and opportunities for improvement were also identified that should be considered in the implementation and follow-up of the plan. The suggestions provided by the participants are valuable and reflect a genuine commitment to the change process, indicating that, with appropriate adjustments, the plan has the potential to be an effective tool for the empowerment of rural women in the Agropaz association.

5. Discussion

The results of this research have revealed significant barriers that limit the empowerment and entrepreneurship of rural women in the Agropaz Association, highlighting four key factors: access to education, gender inequality, access to economic resources and participation in decision-making. These obstacles not only affect women's individual well-being, but also limit their ability to develop agricultural enterprises that could significantly improve their quality of life and that of their families.

Lack of access to formal education has emerged as a critical barrier. Rural women face significant challenges due to insufficient educational infrastructure, lack of resources, and distance to educational centers. These constraints align with previous studies that have shown how physical and logistical barriers affect educational access in rural areas (Hasan et al., 2023). Education is fundamental for acquiring skills and knowledge necessary for entrepreneurship, and its absence impedes not only academic training, but also the development of technical skills required to manage agricultural enterprises. The lack of adequate training limits women's ability to innovate and apply efficient practices in their projects, thus reducing their chances of success in agriculture (Malapit et al., 2019).

On the other hand, gender inequality is another determining factor that restricts women's empowerment. Restrictive cultural norms and discrimination persist in rural communities, affecting the perception of gender equality and participation in community activities. These discriminatory practices are deeply entrenched and are reflected in the unequal distribution of household responsibilities and limited representation of women in leadership roles (Doss et al., 2020; Nazneen et al., 2020). Women's exclusion from decision-making spaces and limited access to leadership positions prevents their voices from being heard and their interests from being represented, which in turn affects the formulation of policies and programs that could support venture development (FAO, 2019). Women face additional barriers to accessing opportunities that could facilitate the development of their agricultural projects.

Lack of access to economic resources, both financial and productive, is a significant barrier to entrepreneurship. Limited access to credit, subsidies and productive resources, such as land and equipment, restricts women's ability to start and expand their agricultural businesses (Galiè et al., 2020). Insufficient financial resources and the difficulty in obtaining loans with favorable conditions directly affect the ability to invest in projects that could improve their quality of life. Productive resources, such as access to adequate land and tools, are critical to success in the agricultural sector, and their lack limits the growth potential and sustainability of ventures (Kabeer, 2019).

Finally, lack of participation in decision-making affects women's ability to influence policies and programs that impact their lives. Cultural and structural barriers and lack of institutional support limit their inclusion in important decision-making processes, such as community meetings and committees (Mahmud et al., 2020). Participation in decision-making is crucial for women to be able to defend their interests and advocate for policies that facilitate venture development. The lack of representation in these spaces prevents them from having a voice in the formulation of strategies that could benefit their economic and social development (Malapit et al., 2019).

Overall, the results of this research highlight that the interaction of these barriers severely limits the empowerment and entrepreneurship of rural women in the Agropaz Association. These interrelated factors create a challenging environment that impedes the development of agricultural initiatives that could transform their lives. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that considers the improvement of educational infrastructure, the promotion of gender equality, access to adequate economic resources and the active inclusion of women in decision-making. Only through a coordinated effort and comprehensive intervention can these barriers be overcome and female empowerment and entrepreneurship in rural contexts be fostered.

6. Conclusions

The study on the Factors Restricting the Empowerment of Rural Women and their Impact on the Development of Entrepreneurship has made it possible to identify and analyze the structural, cultural and educational barriers that significantly limit the opportunities for rural women to consolidate sustainable enterprises. The findings reflect a direct relationship between these limitations and the perpetuation of conditions of inequality that prevent these women from improving their quality of life and that of their families.

First, lack of access to formal education has been identified as one of the main limiting factors. Rural women face serious obstacles in accessing educational opportunities, which limits their skills and knowledge needed to develop and manage enterprises. Low literacy rates and low participation in educational programs reveal a structural deficiency that not only impedes their economic empowerment, but also reinforces their dependence in a context dominated by patriarchal norms.

Likewise, gender inequality manifests itself as a cross-cutting barrier that affects all aspects of women's empowerment in rural contexts. Restrictive cultural norms and practices perpetuate traditional gender roles that marginalize women from decision-making and leadership spaces. This systematic exclusion not only reduces their ability to influence community decisions, but also limits their access to essential resources and support networks for entrepreneurship.

Lack of access to economic resources, including financing and land, emerges as another critical barrier. Rural women have limited access to credit and subsidies, and face unfavorable conditions for obtaining loans, placing them at a significant disadvantage. This financial suppression hinders their ability to start and sustain enterprises, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and economic dependence.

In addition, the lack of participation in decision-making within their communities reinforces the aforementioned barriers. The limited inclusion of rural women in decision-making processes prevents their needs and perspectives from being considered in the formulation of development policies and programs. This lack of representation on community committees and boards maintains a system in which women are seen as passive recipients of decisions, rather than key actors in local development.

Taken together, these factors not only restrict the empowerment of rural women, but also limit their ability to develop agricultural enterprises that could significantly improve their quality of life. The barriers identified reflect a reality in which rural women, despite their potential and desire to contribute to the development of their communities, continue to face structural and cultural obstacles that keep them in a position of vulnerability.

To overcome these barriers, it is imperative to adopt strategies and policies that not only address the identified constraints, but also promote an inclusive and equitable environment that enables rural women to reach their full potential as agents of change and development in their communities.

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