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Research Article

Beyond Credit Access: Cooperative Credit, Cultural Factors, and Women's Financial Empowerment at MAMIDECOT SACCO, Uganda

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Abstract:

Introduction: This study examined the relationship between cooperative credit and women's financial empowerment and the mediating role of cultural factors among female members of MAMIDECOT SACCO in Masaka District, Uganda.

Methods: A convergent mixed-methods design was employed. Data were collected from 340 female SACCO members and 10 administrators using questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, and bootstrapped mediation analysis, while qualitative data were analysed thematically.

Results: Cooperative credit was significantly associated with women's financial empowerment. Cultural factors significantly mediated this relationship, with an indirect effect of −0.078 (Boot SE = 0.018, 95% CI [−0.113, −0.043]). The direct effect remained significant (B = −0.110, $p <$ .001), indicating partial mediation. Qualitative findings showed that credit supported business expansion and income generation, while household influence, repayment pressure, and group lending obligations constrained women's control over borrowed resources.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that cultural and household conditions shape the relationship between cooperative credit and women's financial empowerment. SACCO interventions should therefore consider these conditions when designing credit services for women.

Keywords: Cooperative credit, Women's financial empowerment, cultural factors, Masaka

Introduction

Women's financial empowerment is an important dimension of inclusive economic development because it concerns women's ability to access, control, and make decisions over financial resources. Although financial services have expanded considerably, many women continue to face barriers related to asset ownership, access to formal finance, and participation in household and economic decision-making (Kabeer, 1999; Duflo, 2012).

Access to credit can potentially address some of these constraints by enabling women to invest in businesses, acquire productive assets, and strengthen income-generating activities (Armendáriz & Morduch, 2010). However, access to credit alone does not necessarily translate into financial empowerment because the benefits of borrowing may depend on who controls the funds, how credit is used, and the social conditions surrounding its use.

Cultural norms and household gender relations are particularly relevant to this relationship. Women may obtain financial resources but have limited influence over their use because of prevailing expectations regarding gender roles, household responsibilities, and control over economic resources (Kabeer, 2001; Mayoux, 1999). Consequently, examining credit access without considering the social environment in which credit is used may provide an incomplete understanding of women's financial empowerment.

In Uganda, Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs) are an important component of financial inclusion because they provide members with opportunities to save and access credit within community-based financial systems. The National Financial Inclusion Strategy has also emphasised expanding access to affordable and appropriate financial services, particularly among underserved populations (Bank of Uganda, 2023). However, evidence remains limited on how cooperative credit relates to women's financial empowerment within specific SACCO contexts and on whether cultural factors shape this relationship.

This study therefore examines the relationship between cooperative credit and women's financial empowerment among female members of MAMIDECOT SACCO in Masaka District, Uganda. It specifically examines whether cultural factors mediate the relationship between cooperative credit and women's financial empowerment.

2.0. Literature review

2.1 Cultural Factors and Women's Financial Empowerment

The contribution of credit to women's financial empowerment may be influenced by the cultural and household environment in which financial resources are accessed and used. Gender norms can shape expectations regarding women's economic roles, ownership of assets, household responsibilities, and participation in financial decisions. Kabeer (2001) argues that intra-household relations can influence whether women are able to exercise meaningful control over financial resources obtained through credit programmes.

Mayoux (2001) similarly highlights the importance of socio-cultural and institutional conditions in determining whether financial services contribute to women's empowerment or reproduce existing gender inequalities. Women may therefore obtain loans without having equivalent authority over how borrowed funds are allocated or how returns from investments are controlled. This distinction is important because financial empowerment involves more than access to financial resources; it also encompasses control, decision-making, and the ability to benefit from those resources.

Evidence from microfinance research further indicates that the effects of financial services vary across social and institutional contexts (Crépon et al., 2015). Cultural expectations concerning household roles, economic responsibilities, and financial decision-making may consequently shape the extent to which cooperative credit translates into women's financial empowerment.

Despite this evidence, relatively limited research has examined cultural factors as an intervening mechanism between cooperative credit and women's financial empowerment, particularly within rural SACCO settings in Uganda. The present study therefore examines whether cultural factors mediate the relationship between cooperative credit and women's financial empowerment among members of MAMIDECOT SACCO.

2.2 Theoretical review

This study is guided by Empowerment Theory, initially advanced by Rappaport (1981), which emphasises processes through which individuals develop greater control and influence over matters affecting their lives. This theory suggests that access to financial resources is meaningful when it enhances individuals' capacity to participate in decisions, exercise control over resources, and pursue valued economic outcomes.The theory is relevant to cooperative credit because credit provides women with access to financial resources that can potentially strengthen their economic participation. However, the theory implies that receiving a loan alone does not constitute empowerment. The extent to which credit contributes to empowerment depends on women's ability to control the resources, make decisions regarding their use, and benefit from the resulting economic activities.

The theory also provides a basis for considering cultural factors in the relationship between cooperative credit and women's financial empowerment. Cultural norms and household expectations may either facilitate or constrain women's ability to exercise control over financial resources. Thus, the empowerment process may differ according to the social conditions within which credit is accessed and utilised. The theory therefore supports the examination of whether access to cooperative credit is associated with greater financial decision-making and control among women and whether cultural conditions influence this relationship.

2. Materials and Methods

The study adopted a pragmatic research philosophy and a convergent mixed-methods design. It was conducted as a case study of MAMIDECOT SACCO in Masaka District, Uganda. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and integrated during interpretation. The quantitative strand examined the relationship between cooperative credit, cultural factors, and women's financial empowerment, while qualitative interviews provided contextual explanations.

The study population comprised 2,800 active female members of MAMIDECOT SACCO, based on the SACCO's 2024 membership records. Using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 5% precision level, a sample of 350 was obtained, of which 340 female members participated in the survey and 10 SACCO administrators and managers were purposively selected as key informants. Female respondents were selected using stratified, proportionate, and simple random sampling.

Quantitative data were collected using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire measuring cooperative credit, cultural factors, and women's financial empowerment. Cooperative credit covered access to loans, affordability, repayment conditions, and use of credit. Cultural factors captured relevant gender norms and household expectations affecting women's financial participation. Women's financial empowerment was measured through financial decision-making, control over resources, financial knowledge and confidence, and use of financial services. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with SACCO administrators and managers.

Content validity was established through expert review, while internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with 0.70 considered the acceptable threshold. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was

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maintained in accordance with applicable Uganda National Council for Science and Technology and Kampala International University Research Ethical Committee requirements.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis. Regression analysis assessed the relationship between cooperative credit and women's financial empowerment. Bootstrapping mediation analysis was used to examine the indirect effect of cultural factors. The indirect effect was considered statistically significant when the 95% bootstrap confidence interval excluded zero. Qualitative data were analysed thematically and integrated with the quantitative findings.

3. Results

3.1. Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

3.1.1. Responses for Age group

The table presents the distribution of respondents by age group. The data shows that the majority of respondents fall within the 36-40 years age category, comprising 52.1% of the sample. Those aged above 40 years represent 37.1%, while the youngest group, 18-35 years, accounts for 10.9% of the respondents. The total sample size for this study was 340 respondents.

Table 1: Results of Responses on Age group

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18-35 years	37	10.9
36-40 years	177	52.1
Above 40 years	126	37.1
Total	**340**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data 2025

As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents (52.1%) were aged 36–40 years, followed by those aged above 40 years (37.1%). Women aged 18–35 years constituted the smallest proportion of the sample (10.9%). Thus, the study participants were predominantly women aged 36 years and above.

3.1.2. Responses on Marital Status

The table illustrates the marital status distribution of the respondents. The majority, 62.9%, reported being married, followed by 14.7% who are separated or divorced. Single respondents make up 12.4% of the sample, while widowed individuals account for 10.0%. The total number of respondents was 340.

Table 2: Results of Responses on Marital Status

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Single	42	12.4
Married	214	62.9
Separated/Divorced	50	14.7
Widowed	34	10.0
Total	**340**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data 2025

The respondents were predominantly married women (62.9%), followed by separated/divorced women (14.7%), single women (12.4%), and widowed women (10.0%). This distribution indicates that married women constituted the largest proportion of the study sample, while the other marital-status categories were represented to varying degrees.

3.1.3. Results on Education Level

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents based on their education level. The majority of responders (51.2%) completed their primary schooling. People with no formal education account for 16.8%, while 19.1% have completed high school. Respondents with university or tertiary education make up the smallest group at 12.9%. The total sample size for this study was 340.

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Table 3: Results of Responses on Education level

Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No Formal Education	57	16.8
Primary Level	174	51.2
Secondary Level	65	19.1
University/Tertiary Level	44	12.9
Total	**340**	**100.0**

Source: Primary Data 2025

The findings show that 51.2% of respondents had primary-level education**,** while 19.1% had secondary education, 12.9% had university/tertiary education, and 16.8% had no formal education. Thus, the sample was predominantly composed of women with primary-level education, with relatively smaller proportions having higher levels of formal education.

3.1.4. Results on Category of Business

Table 22 shows the distribution of respondents by the type of business they operate. The majority of respondents, 84.4%, are engaged in trade-related businesses, while 15.6% are involved in service-oriented businesses.

Table 4: Results of Responses on Category of businesses

Type of Business	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Service	53	15.6
Trade	287	84.4
Total	**340**	**100.0**

Source: Primary data, 2025

As presented in Table 4**,** the majority of respondents **(**84.4%**)** were engaged in trade, while 15.6% operated service-based businesses. The findings therefore show that trade was the predominant business category among the women surveyed.

3.1.5. Results on Duration under Cooperatives

The table below presents the distribution of respondents based on the duration they have been members of cooperatives. It shows both the frequency and the corresponding percentage of respondents in each category.

Table 5: Results of Duration under Cooperatives

Duration under Cooperatives	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 3 years	50	14.7
3–5 years	180	52.9
5–9 years	70	20.6
10 years and above	40	11.8
Total	**340**	**100**

Source: Primary data, 2025

As shown in Table 5, most respondents **(**52.9%**)** had been cooperative members for 3–5 years**.** This was followed by those with 5–9 years of membership (20.6%), less than 3 years (14.7%), and 10 years or more (11.8%). Thus, the sample was predominantly composed of women with 3–5 years of cooperative membership**.**

3.2. Descriptive Findings

3.2.1: Descriptive Statistics on Credit Provision among Women Members of MAMIDECOT, Masaka District

The table summarizes respondents' agreement levels with statements related to accessibility, affordability, repayment flexibility, confidence in loan repayment, control over financial decisions, and the broader impact of loans and credit on their financial wellbeing and independence.

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Table 6: Descriptive Statistics on Credit Provision among Women Members of MAMIDECOT, Masaka District

Statement		SA	A	N	D	DS	Mean	SD
Loans and credit services are easily accessible to me when needed.	N %	213 (62.6)	115 (33.8)	12 (3.5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.60	.548
The interest rates on loans and credit are reasonable and affordable	N %	213 (62.6)	115 (33.8)	12 (3.5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.60	.548
I have the flexibility to choose repayment terms that suit my needs	N %	214 (62.9)	115 (33.8)	11 (3.2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.60	.553
I am confident in my ability to repay loans and credit on time	N %	213 (62.6)	117 (34.4)	10 (2.9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.59	.554
Access to loans and credit has improved my financial wellbeing.	N %	213 (62.6)	117 (34.4)	10 (2.9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.59	.560
I have control over my financial decisions and resources.	N %	212 (62.4)	117 (34.4)	11 (3.2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.59	.560
Financial empowerment has improved my overall well-being and independence.	N %	166 (48.8)	155 (45.6)	19 (5.6)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.43	.599
Access to loan and credit facilities has empowered us to support one another.	N %	166 (48.8)	154 (45.3)	20 (5.9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.43	.603
Overall Mean							**4.55**	**0.566**

Source: Primary data, 2025

Key; 5 – Strongly Agree (SA), 4 – Agree (A), 3 – Neutral (N), 2 – Disagree (D), 1 –Disagree Strongly (DS).

The findings indicate a strongly positive assessment of cooperative credit services among women members of MAMIDECOT SACCO. The overall mean of 4.55 (SD = 0.566) shows high agreement that credit is accessible, affordable, and offered with flexible repayment conditions. The highest-rated items concerned access to credit, affordability of interest rates, and flexibility of repayment terms (means = 4.60). Respondents also reported improved control over financial resources and financial wellbeing (means = 4.59), while empowerment to support one another and improved independence recorded slightly lower but still high means (4.43). The absence of disagreement responses across all items further indicates consistently positive perceptions of the SACCO's credit services.

Table 7: Bootstrapped Indirect Effects of Credit on Women's Financial Empowerment through Cultural Factors

SACCO role	a (SE)	b (SE)	Indirect effect (ab)	Boot SE	95% Bootstrap CI	Direct effect c′ (SE)	Total effect c (SE)	Interpretation
Credit provision	-0.221 (0.040)	0.354 (0.040)	-0.078	0.018	[-0.113, -0.043]	-0.110 (0.013)	-0.101 (0.041)	Significant indirect effect

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Source: Primary data, 2025

The bootstrapped indirect effect of cooperative credit through cultural factors was negative and statistically significant because the 95% bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero. The direct effect remained significant after cultural factors were included, supporting partial mediation.

Qualitative Results: Cooperative Credit and Women's Financial Empowerment

Qualitative interviews with SACCO administrators and managers generated three themes concerning the contribution of cooperative credit to women's financial empowerment.

Access to affordable credit. Respondents reported that MAMIDECOT SACCO provides relatively affordable loans with flexible repayment arrangements, enabling women with limited financial resources to access credit for productive activities. One administrator noted, *"These loans help women start businesses."* Respondents associated improved credit access with reduced reliance on spouses for financial support.

Business expansion and income generation. Interviewees reported that women used SACCO loans to establish and expand businesses, particularly in retail trade, agriculture, and poultry farming. One administrator observed, *"We have seen many women start small shops or farms using our loans, and most of them now earn a steady income."* The accounts suggest that credit facilitated productive investment and income generation.

Financial counselling and loan management. Respondents indicated that credit services were complemented by guidance on budgeting, investment, and repayment. However, group lending was identified as a challenge where one member's default affected other members. As one manager explained, *"If one member defaults, it affects the whole group."*

Table 8: Results of Triangulation of Qualitative and Quantitative Data

SACCO Role / Theme	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings	Triangulation / Interpretation
Credit Role	The indirect effect through cultural factors was −0.078, with a 95% bootstrap CI of [−0.113, −0.043]. The direct effect remained significant (B = −0.110, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation.	Managers reported that credit facilitates business expansion; however, women face challenges such as group liability, repayment pressure, and limited autonomy in borrowing decisions. In some cases, husbands influence or restrict loan use.	**Convergent evidence:** Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that credit influences women's economic activities and has potential to support business growth and income generation.

4. Discussion

4.1 Cooperative Credit and Women's Financial Empowerment

The study found that women generally reported favourable access to cooperative credit, with an overall mean of 4.55 (SD = 0.566). Respondents particularly reported favourable access to loans, affordable interest rates, and flexible repayment arrangements. However, despite these positive perceptions of credit services, regression analysis revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between cooperative credit and women's financial empowerment (B = −0.101, p = .015). This finding suggests that access to credit, in itself, does not necessarily translate into greater financial decision-making, control over resources, or economic independence among women.

The finding is important because it distinguishes credit access from financial empowerment. Although women may obtain loans on relatively favourable terms, the benefits of borrowing may depend on how the borrowed resources are controlled, allocated, and used. Credit obligations may also place financial demands on borrowers that do not automatically result in increased control over household or productive resources. In contexts where women have limited influence over financial decisions, obtaining a loan may therefore increase access to financial resources without necessarily increasing their control over those resources.

The finding is also consistent with the argument that financial inclusion should not be assessed solely in terms of access to financial products. Meaningful financial empowerment involves women's ability to participate in financial decisions, control resources, and derive sustained benefits from financial services. Thus, the negative association observed in this study suggests that the provision of credit needs to be accompanied by mechanisms that strengthen women's capacity to control and productively utilise borrowed funds.

4.2 The Mediating Role of Cultural Factors

The study further established that cultural factors significantly mediated the relationship between cooperative credit and women's financial empowerment. The indirect effect was −0.078, with a bootstrap standard error of 0.018 and a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [−0.113, −0.043]. Since the confidence interval did not include zero, the indirect effect was statistically significant. Moreover, the direct effect of credit remained negative and significant after cultural factors were introduced ($c' = -0.110$, SE = 0.013), indicating partial mediation.

The finding that cultural factors have a positive association with women's financial empowerment when included in the full model (B = 0.354, p < .001) further indicates that cultural conditions are relevant to women's financial outcomes. This suggests that interventions addressing restrictive cultural practices and strengthening supportive norms may complement credit provision in promoting women's financial empowerment.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that although women reported generally favourable access to cooperative credit, access to credit alone does

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not necessarily translate into greater financial empowerment. Cooperative credit was significantly and negatively associated with women's financial empowerment, while cultural factors significantly mediated this relationship. The persistence of a significant direct effect alongside a significant indirect effect indicates partial mediation, suggesting that the relationship between cooperative credit and women's financial empowerment is influenced by the cultural conditions within which women access, control, and utilise borrowed resources. Therefore, strengthening the contribution of cooperative credit to women's financial empowerment requires credit interventions to be accompanied by measures that enhance women's control over borrowed resources and address cultural conditions that may constrain the benefits of credit.

6. Recommendations

Integrate financial management support with credit provision. MAMIDECOT SACCO should complement loan services with practical financial management, investment, budgeting, and business-management training to strengthen women's capacity to use borrowed resources productively and manage repayment obligations.

Strengthen women's control over borrowed resources. The SACCO should design credit programmes that promote women's meaningful participation in decisions concerning loan utilisation, investment, repayment, and the management of returns from credit-financed activities. This would help ensure that access to credit translates into greater control over financial resources.

Integrate cultural considerations into credit programmes. Given the significant mediating role of cultural factors, MAMIDECOT SACCO should incorporate gender- and culturally responsive approaches into its lending programmes. Engagement with households and community leaders could help address social norms and practices that may constrain women's control and use of borrowed resources.

Establish post-loan follow-up and advisory services. MAMIDECOT SACCO should strengthen post-disbursement monitoring and advisory support to identify challenges affecting the productive utilisation of loans, business performance, and repayment. Regular follow-up could enable the SACCO to provide timely financial and business guidance to borrowers.

Broaden the assessment of women's financial inclusion outcomes. Government, SACCOs, and other financial-sector stakeholders should evaluate women's financial inclusion programmes not only by loan uptake and repayment rates but also by changes in women's control over financial resources, participation in financial decisions, and ability to derive productive benefits from credit. This would encourage financial interventions that focus on meaningful financial empowerment rather than credit access alone.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of the data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles governing research involving human participants and was approved by Uganda National Council of Science and Technology SS3454ES and Kampala International University Research Ethical Committee (Protocol No: [KIU-2024-463], approved on [19th-Nov-2024].

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the confidentiality and anonymity of the information provided. No personally identifiable information was disclosed in the reporting of the study findings.

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