

**The role of women in Socio-Economic Development:  
A Case Study of Women involved in small-scale business in  
Nairobi County**

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**Abstract**

*The study main objective was to find out the role of women in socio-economic development, with a case study of women within the slums of Nairobi County. To achieve this objective, the study was guided by the following specific objectives: To determine the women perception of the concept of social economic development, establish the role of women in socio-economic development in the community, determine the factors that challenge women in their daily lives while carrying out their social economic activities, investigate the efforts being done by women and other stakeholders to alleviate the social economic development challenges. To achieve these objectives, the research use both quantitative and qualitative approach to collect and analyze the data. The quantitative approach was met through the use of demographic information, while the qualitative findings were by the use of In-depth interviews for Key informants and focus group discussions (FGDs). The target population was middle aged women, of ages between 25 and 65 years. The sample size was 15 women living within various slum areas within Nairobi County. These slums were purposively selected to give representative information. The findings of the research were analyzed using the SPSS, Thematic and Content analysis. The findings were presented in pie charts, tables, columns and in themes. The findings of the research show that the women have a clear understanding of development. The factors that contribute to underdevelopment are lack of skills to run investments at 33.3%, cultural beliefs and insecurity at 26.6%, and bad policies at 13.3%. The study shows that majority of the women living in slum areas of Nairobi County engage in selling vegetables and fruits. The main challenges women face while engaging in social economic development activities are lack of capital such at 33.3% and cultural expectations in patriarchal society at 26.6%. The findings of the study show that social-economic activities impact positively to women and in the society in general. Women are able to support their family; there is reduced poverty and cases of domestic violence as a result of improved household income. The study gave the recommendation which can help women overcome the challenges they face. First, women should be provided with funds.*

*Secondly, policies which empower women to start business activities should be revised and improved.*

*Lastly, the society should be educated in order to fight gender discrimination and gender inequality.*

**Key words:** *Development, Culture, Social-economic growth, Entrepreneurship*

## 1.0 Introduction

Development means a process of change of one's state of life style. It is a term used to show progress of a country economically, socially or politically. For example, Kenya, like all other parts of the world, is experiencing economic growth. This is observable in the infrastructure, accessibility of health facilities, education for all, safe clean water, electricity, political and social stability. Culture is the peoples' way of life, beliefs and values. Human beings are socialized alongside their cultural practices beliefs. Socio-economic growth refers to the quantitative, sustained increase in the country's output/income accompanied by expansion in its labor force, consumption, capital and volume.

Entrepreneurship is the ability to start a self-employed business, which can offer jobs or employment to others. Entrepreneurship is an important indicator of socio-economic progress of a nation. It shows people have freedom to do business and raise their standards of living (Mazrui, 1998).

This research paper is focusing on the role of women in social-economic development in Nairobi County. The researcher was interested in this topic as it involves three main themes underpinning African cultural knowledge. These themes are mainly adulthood, marriage and family relations.

Marriage is a rite of passage, carried out by young people when they attain the stage of adulthood.

Adulthood is defined by the traditions and customs of a particular community, when young people have

gone through the initiation rites of passage. After the initiation rites, they are expected to make the bold step towards marriage life. This serves as a transformation from one stage of development to the next within the given community.

Therefore, when a woman gets married she lives with her spouse who according to cultural expectations, provides for her upkeep and the children, while on the other hand the woman is expected to take care of the family needs. Her contribution to society and development is seen in the light of family chores, child bearing and care for her husband. Child bearing is crucial in an African marriage and setting because of family lineage, and continued development of the community. In other words, the roles of the family members are clearly defined, especially between the husband and wife. Therefore, the family relations are enduring factors which both the husband and wife have to integrate for sustainability of their children and community in general (Mbiti, 1988).

This paper is examining some of the challenges experienced by women as they take part in socio-economic development activities, with specific reference to African women involved in small scale business (SMEs) and living in Nairobi. According to the researcher's observation, women are active in the small scale business sector, while their husbands are involved in other types of jobs. They are known to trade on merchandise, used clothes, fish, vegetables, and fruits. Some of their spouses spend time in socio-clubs and playing "Ajua" a game played using pebbles in market places.

It is common among many African communities to have polygamous family. Consequently, even in the changing modern African communities, some men are seen to have a tendency of marrying many wives, and also being involved in multiple sexual partnerships, taken to be a mark of power and leadership. African women have no problem with their husbands marrying as many wives, so long as they are provided for and depending on the kind of marriage they are involved in. According to African culture, having many wives is a sign of power, leadership and control. Wives, animals and children are considered to be property of the head of the household (Mbiti, 1988).

Most of African communities are also known to strictly observe a number of cultural practices and rituals, representative of African cultures: beliefs and values. Included in this paper are discussions on the barriers to socio-economic development in relation to culture and cultural expectations. Women are particularly compelled by cultural expectations in the choices they make, and balancing between work and family responsibilities.

One concern is whether people understand what could be some of the constraints of socio-economic development, or the meaning of development itself, and how it affects them generally. The researcher set out to conduct in-depth interviews to gather information on the role of women in family settings and socio-economic development. The study focus on questions such as: the women's perception of development; their participation; its effects on them and the challenges encountered; and what ought

to be done in order to improve their socio-economic development. The outcome of the study helps in determining the most appropriate developmental strategies, policies, relevant projects that are in line with developmental goals of women leading to improving their wellbeing. (MDGs; Kenya Vision 2030)

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

On the outset, women, especially those living in Nairobi are seen to be doing well in small scale business, that may eventually become entrepreneurship sort of occupations, if they prosper to the extent of employing other people to work in those business. For instance, they are occupied in a hotel business, home cleaning, gardening, vegetable venders, florists and fish industry where they sell merchandise, among other activities. These women may not be fully empowered to do these businesses at a large scale but they are fully occupied and working. This could mean that women are resourceful human capital

that has been realized so far. Their motivation factor is their entrepreneurship while their husband's role of providing for the family has failed. Therefore, women step in to support the husband's insufficient income. One would want to explore the woman's empowerment, as she continues to make contribution to the social economic development of a country like Kenya other than being regarded as a housewife.

The cultural expectations of a woman to be a homemaker and a caregiver do not hold value any longer. Women have been curtailed on realizing their potentialities and capabilities having not been allowed to work without following the societal

beliefs, values, and even working against their husband's wishes and instructions. The women role in social economic contribution in the society is failing short of recognition, yet we see women working both in the family set-up and in the employment sectors. To an observer there is a contradiction because the modern society is constantly reminding women in media and dailies of their role in the country's economic development (Besha, 1996). The reminders are also in leaders meeting agendas where they make announcements that women should be more dynamic and take active role in community development projects (Swantz, 1985). These and other forms of announcements, reach the people who automatically conclude that women have been inactive as far as progress is concerned. Hence they need to be woken up from the slumber. In this context, women are being invited to do what they already know and do within their constraints.

The overall question is to inquire on the women's understanding of their contribution to social- economic development of the country. Apparently, most women are not aware of how much they do for their family, community in terms of nation building and wellbeing. The family being the basic economic and social unit, its attitudes influence economic development in a number of ways. For example, influence population growth rate, hence women need individual freedom in making economic development decisions. Women care a lot for their families and family progress leads to healthy lifestyles and development. This means if women were empowered they would gain skills in managing their businesses and hence

supporting themselves and their families.

### **1.3 Objectives of the research**

1. To determine the women perception of the concept of social economic development.
2. To establish the role of women in socio-economic development in the community
3. To determine the factors that challenge women in their daily lives while carrying out their social economic activities.
4. To investigate the efforts being done by women and other stakeholders to alleviate the social economic development challenges.

### **2.0 Theoretical Framework**

Women show a full understanding of development. They are aware of the reason why they work.

All they earn from their work is meant for their families. Therefore, they invest themselves into their families. They raise healthy children, health here does not necessarily mean absence of disease, but holistic development.

Women make a significant contribution towards the process of socio-economic transformation and sustainable growth to the economy of a country. It is impossible to implement effective programmes for the economic and social development without the full participation of women (Ilo-Stan Chu, 2013).

According to Corporate Communication and Public Affairs (CCPA, 2010), all sectors should promote the empowerment and effective integration

and participation of women at all levels of socio-economic development especially in decision-making; abolish legislation and discourage customs or habits that are discriminatory against women; promote effective educational awareness programmes aimed at changing negative attitudes towards women; create or adopt technologies which will ensure the stability of employment and professional progress for women workers; and take such other measures that shall eliminate prejudices against women and promote the equality of the female gender with that of the male gender in every respect (Corporate Communication and Public Affairs, 2010).

Women are involved in various social economic activities for instance, a Tanzanian male leader in an important meeting of decision making, was heard saying to other men "...We cannot despise the mother who bore us!" (Swantz, 1985). That was meant to say, involve women in the agenda of socio-

economic development. That means the woman's position cannot be separated from the total cultural, economic, and social institutions because she is part and parcel of the society. In deed in the African society, a woman symbolizes everything that has traditionally been precious (Swantz, 1985). From the African traditions to today, a woman's position in the community remains the same. It is the women who integrate the new development with the traditional development. A point of contradiction is reached when we learn that in an African society, the woman's position can be abused by ridicule and mistreatment by the spouse, relatives or employer. Women face many challenges

in their effort to carry out social-economic activities to reality.

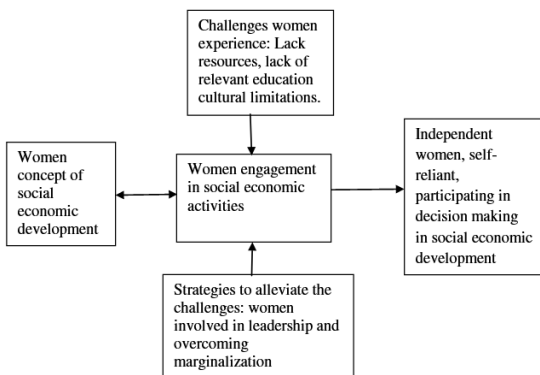
According to Watson (2003), a researcher in Pakistan, stated that encouragement and support of women entrepreneurs can empower and help the women make an effective contribution to the economic development of their country. This report indicates that women entrepreneur's full economic potential is not being realized because many women have been left out even if they are the majority in demographic illustrations. Women suffer from a lack of access to: capital, land, business premises, information technology, training, and agency assistance. Furthermore, inherent attitudes of a patriarchal society that is, men are superior to women and that women are best suited to be homemakers, create formidable challenges coupled with a lack of encouragement from male family members. Consequently this results into limited spatial mobility and a dearth or lack of social capital. Factors such as education, income, age, gender, and patriarchal system have typically influenced the marginalized role of women in socioeconomic development.

Women have been making efforts to overcome the challenges they encounter during their social-economic development activities. To start with, women aspire for leadership positions in all spheres of governance in both the public and private sector (Højgaard, 2002). They at times meet with a lot of

opposition from the society, especially the male critics, which has not been easy. However, there is no doubt that there are success stories. Of interest are the efforts women have made to rise

above such circumstances and fight for recognition, despite the risks involved: of being “labeled,” and the risk of breaking family ties. This is done all in the name of making a contribution to socioeconomic development, and making life better for all. Secondly, to overcome the marginalization of women in socio-economic development, the National and County Government and other stakeholders have invested in empowering women and girls in various sectors such as, education, reduced taxes and investments loans, eliminating gender inequalities and patriarchal system which have typically influenced the marginalized role of women in socio-economic development (Schech & Haggis 2000).

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework**



**3.0 Methodology**

The methodology used to arrive in the findings of this research was through the use of Ethnographical approach. The research use both Quantitative and Qualitative approach to collect and analyze the data. The quantitative approach was met through the use of demographic information, while the qualitative findings were by the use of In-depth interviews for Key informants and focus group discussions (FGDs). The target population was middle aged

women, of ages between 25 and 65 years.

These are women who are actively involved in economic activities and at the same time majority are involved in bringing up their children. The sample size was 15 women living within various slum areas within Nairobi County. These slums were purposively selected to give representative information. These slums are located around the following residential areas in Nairobi County: Kayole, Kibera, Ongata Rongai, Kuwinda-Karen, Roy Sambu, and Kariobangi. From the 15 participants, 8 were key informant and 7 participants were put into a Focus Group Discussion. The findings of the research were analyzed using the SPSS, Thematic and Content analysis. The findings were presents in pie charts, tables, columns and in themes.

**4.0 Research Findings**

**4.1 Defining development**

The participant when asked the question “what is development and what shapes efforts to development?”, from the findings, they have a clear understanding of development, which means change of an individual’s state of living and progress of a country in economic, social and political sectors. From the fifteen sampled participants, development was sited to be in the following levels (see the table 1).

**Table 1: Responses for definition of development**

Variable	Examples in areas of development	frequency
<b>Economic Level</b>	Owning piece of land/plot, running a business, increased savings in the bank, owning livestock, paying house rent,	15
<b>Social Level</b>	Affording medical care, paying school fees, affording three meals in day, having clean water and sanitation, improved security, improved infrastructure, having recognized positions in society, advancing in education, being employed, having better jobs and promotions	13
<b>Political Level</b>	More women in parliament and other positions of leadership, girls enrolling in school, gender equality and equity, abolishing cultural limitations	10

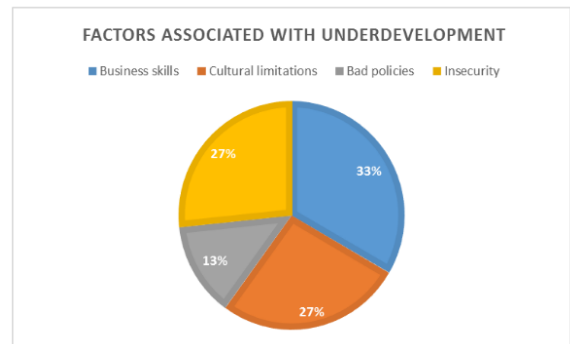
## 4.2 Factors which contribute to underdevelopment

When the participants were asked the question, “what factors contribute to underdevelopment?”

Various responses were given such as lack of skills to run an investment which was reported by 33.3% of the participants. Here they said that, people having no knowledge of how to run businesses especially in recording and balancing the income and expenditures, lead investments to collapse and consequently underdevelopment occurs. Cultural beliefs were reported by 26.6% of the participants as a factor contributing to underdevelopment. The participants said that in most of the African communities, women are not empowered to own property, yet they are the majority in terms of population. In addition, women are the ones involved in small scale businesses which have been cited in other findings, to be the backbone of a country’s GDP development. Bad policies were cited by 13.3% of the participants as a leading factor in underdevelopment especially lack of will power to fight corruption and policies to empower women to join leadership to mention a few. Lastly, insecurity was mentioned by 26.6% of the participant as a factor leading to underdevelopment. Insecurity prevents women to start business in slums because they fear their investments will be vandalized. At a larger scale, when there is political turmoil or insurgence of terrorist, business are vandalized which consequently lead to underdevelopment (see fig. 2).

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**Figure 2: Factors associated with underdevelopment**



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**Figure 2: Factors associated with underdevelopment**

## 4.3 Types of social-economic activities women engage in

The researcher was interested in finding out the types of social economic activities do women engage in. When asked the question, “What type of social economic activities do women engage in?” the participants gave various responses (see table 2). The researcher found out that women are actively participating in economic activities to uplift themselves and their families. Majority of the women living in slum areas of Nairobi County engage in selling vegetables and fruits, as mentioned by all the participants. The reason for this is because the business does not require a lot of capital to start, secondly, one does not need to rent a house but a small makeshift structure and lastly, one does not require a license from the city council apart from the little fees collected on daily basis on the spot. This is the same case for women who engage in selling second hand clothes commonly known as “Mutumba” Table

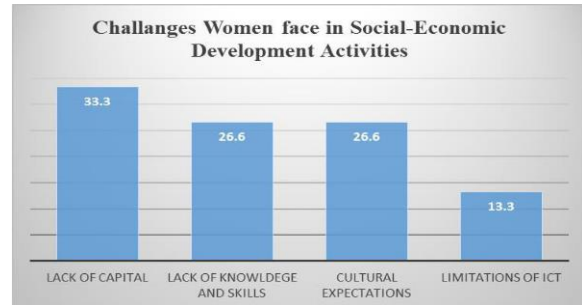
## 2: Social-economic activities women engage in

No.	Variables	Frequency
1	Selling vegetables and fruits	15
2	Salonist	10
3	Tailoring and mending clothes	12
4	Selling second hand clothes	14
5	Matatu touts and Bodaboda	8
6	Running food kiosk	15
7	Washing clothes	11
8	House-helps	9
9	Roasting maize and yams	5

### 4.4 Challenges women face while engaging in social-economic development

The research findings show that women face various challenges while engaging in social economic development activities. Lack of capital such as, money to start small business and land to locate the business is the challenge at 33.3%. They lack knowledge and skills to invest in business, which would give them good returns. They are limited in capacity to engage modern technology which can be effective in keeping track of their business. Furthermore, cultural expectations in patriarchal society make women to be left out in social-economic activities which are gendered or stereotyped. For example, in majority of the Kenyan communities, women are expected to be housewives and babysitters, while men are the breadwinners. Therefore, women who would like to engage in social-economic activities such as driving Matatu and Bodaboda, mechanics, road construction, among others, are seen to be social misfits (see fig 3).

**Figure 3: Challenges women face while engaging in social-economic activities**



### 4.5 Overcoming challenges facing women in social-economic activities

When asked the questions, “What do you think should be done to overcome the challenges women face in their social-economic activities?” and the question “Are there some efforts being done in your community to alleviate the levels of underdevelopment?” the participants had the following to say:

PKE aged 34 years, “The Non-Governmental Organizations should fund women to begin small scale businesses. The National and county government should come up with policies which gives subsidy to women and reduce the taxes women have to go through to start small businesses. In work environment, organizations should avoid gender discrimination and equal opportunities be given to both gender.”

POR aged 29 years, “Culture has been a stabling block to women development. For example boys are given land while girls are not. Secondly, women should remain at home and not go to work. Their duty is to take care of the children. You find in some places, especially where I come from, all the properties belong to my husband or my brothers.

Therefore, we should embrace the changes which are happening and abolish the



traditional practices which demean women and girls”

From these responses, the best remedy to overcome the challenges women face in their endeavors to engage in social economic development activities are: providing women with funds, making good policies which empower women to start business activities, avoiding gender discrimination in places of work, eliminating cultural limitations which are outdated by time. The participants admitted that the National and County Government and other stakeholders are making efforts facilitate women to overcome challenges experienced during their social-economic activities although there is need for more inputs to be added to help women.

#### **4.6 Impacts of social-economic activities on women and the society**

The findings of the study show that social-economic activities impact positively to women and in the society in general. The participants reached at by the study reported the following impacts as a result of engaging in social economic activities. Of interest to discuss is the ability of women to support the families adequately in terms of buying basic commodities such as, clothes and food. In addition, all participants who were engaging in social-economic activities said that unlike before, they are now able to pay school fees for their children up to tertiary levels and as well afford better medical services.

Engaging in social-economic activities has reduced issues of domestic violence because women do not fight or quarrel with their husbands as before over household income. This is because women are now independent and able to

support themselves without depending on their husbands. In general, social-economic activities improve the lives of people and helps eradicating poverty in families and society in general (see table 3).

**Table 3: Impact of social-economic activities**

No	Variable	Examples	Frequency
1	Ability to support the families adequately	Buying clothes, food, education fees, medical fees	15
2	Eradicate poverty	Better housing facility, able to support their aging parents	15
3	Improved household income	Have saved money in 'Chama' and other micro-finance institutions	12
4	Independence	women do not have to depend on their husbands to give them money	8
5	Peace in the family	There is reduced quarrels as a result of improvement of household income	15
6	Reduced crime rate	Their children no longer go to the street to beg or engage in petty theft	4
7	Feeling happy and fulfilled	Generally women are happy with steps they have made and are hopeful that their economic activities will expand and grow	10

## **5.0 Conclusion, Summary and Recommendation**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

The most interesting thing one can capture and retain is the fact that underdevelopment is when resources are not used to their full potential. This results to local or regional development getting slowed. Underdeveloped nations are characterized by a wide disparity between their rich and poor populations, and an unhealthy balance of trade. Symptoms of underdevelopment include lack of access to job opportunities, health care, clean water and sanitation, food security, relevant education programs, proper and enough housing. When these challenges are over-come, then we can consider development underway. Women are the key players when one examines how development goals are achieved. They take care for the family well being, educating their children, and working outside the home. Most of those successful families have been led by women. Men are known abdicate their duties and run away from their families in avoidance of family

demands. Women have never been onlookers on matters of development. They participate actively in the process of socioeconomic development. For example, Kenyan economy which is based on agricultural resources: cash crop and horticultural farming. Women form the main agricultural labor force. They work extra hours to make their families' life style more comfortable or better. By so doing they are developing their individual families, the community and largely the country. Women have already been doing a lot in the society both in the past and in the current period. On the contrary, it appears like the male gender is threatened by women empowerment through education, knowledge and skills, to work better both at home and in formal employment. In order to prevent the women from becoming conscious of how much they are contributing to socio-economic development of the country, the society has to remind the women to retain respect for their spouses. Majority of women interviewed expressed that this is a weapon used by the society to control their independence, self development, and provision for their children.

## **5.2 Summary**

The findings show that the women have a clear understanding of development, which they term as changes of an individual's state of living in a better way in terms of economic, social and political levels. Improvement in financial capacity is seen as the factor which defines development. The factors that contribute to underdevelopment are lack of skills to run investments at 33.3%, cultural beliefs and insecurity at 26.6%, and bad policies at 13.3%. The study shows that

majority of the women living in slum areas of Nairobi County engage in selling vegetables and fruits. This is because the business does not require a lot of capital to start and run. Women face various challenges while engaging in social economic development activities. The main challenges are lack of capital such at 33.3% and cultural expectations in patriarchal society at 26.6%. To overcome the challenges women face in their endeavors to engage in social economic development activities, women should be provided with funds. Secondly, policies which empower women to start business activities should be revised and improved. Lastly, the society should be educated in order to fight gender discrimination in places of work and eliminating cultural limitations which are outdated by time. In conclusion, the findings of the study show that social- economic activities impact positively to women and in the society in general. Women are able to support their family; there is reduced poverty and cases of domestic violence as a result of improved household income.

## **5.3 Recommendations**

1. The National and County Government and NGOs should provide women with funds at a zero interest to start and run social-economic activities.
2. The National and County Government and Banks should make policies which encourage women to start and run social-economic activities.
3. There is need to improve gender education, which should be taught from primary schools in order to overcome gender discrimination and gender inequality.

4. The government and other stakeholders should actively engage in eliminating outdated cultural

practices which limit women to advance themselves.

### **Areas of further study**

1. Social-economic activities women engage in rural areas apart from farming.

2. Common social-economic activities women engage in and how they impact to them.

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### **Appendix A: Demographic Tool**

The aim of tool is to collect the quantitative data

My name is.....am here to gather information in regard to social-economic activities women living in slum areas are involved in as means of sustaining themselves. I kindly request you to accord me 15 minutes to respond to some few questions which will help me to achieve my objectives.

The information you will give me is confidential. It is for academic purpose and it will also help me come up with better recommendation for helping women to be empowered in their social economic activities International Journal of Science Arts and Commerce Vol. 2 No. 9, November-2017

The information you will give me is confidential. It is for academic purpose and it will also help me come up with better recommendation for helping women to be empowered in their social economic activities.

1. How old are you?
2. Are you married? If yes, how many children do you have?
3. What kind of social-economic activity are you engaged in?
4. How did you get capital to begin this investment?

5. How much profit does your business give in return per day/month/annually?
6. Do you have some skills for running the business in terms of ICT, banking and book keeping?
7. Does your partner support you to engage in your social-economic activity? If no, how has he prevented you to advance in your social-economic activity?
8. What mechanisms have you put into place to ensure the sustainability of your social-economic activity?
9. In which ways has your business transformed your life?

## **Appendix B: Field Research Questions**

### **Interviewing Guide Questions**

These are based on the seven principles of research techniques in Ethnographic studies: descriptive, functional, structural, contrast, hypothetical, story incident and personal experiences. The paper is examining the role played by women in contribution to socio-economic development and the many challenges they face in taking socio-economic development positions with specific reference to women living in slum areas within Nairobi County in Kenya. What is development according to you?

2. What factors contribute to underdevelopment?
3. What types of social economic activities do women engage in?
4. What challenges do women face in their endeavor to engage in social economic development?

5. What do you think should be done to overcome the challenges women face in their social-economic activities?
6. Are there some efforts being done in your community to alleviate the levels of under development?
7. How do these social economic activities impact on women and the society in general?
8. Do you have any comment or recommendation to make in addition to the questions you have responded to?