



## Empowered Identities: A Phenomenological Study of Women's Inner Transformation through Community-Driven Entrepreneurial Learning in Rural Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

Community-based entrepreneurship training has long been recognized for enhancing women's economic participation, yet its deeper impact on identity and personal transformation often remains obscured. This study explores how such training influences the internal experiences of women micro-entrepreneurs, beyond measurable economic success. Employing an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research captures the subjective narratives of ten female participants who had completed a structured entrepreneurial program in a rural Indonesian setting. Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted over a four-month period, from January to April 2024.

Thematic analysis revealed four emergent themes: rediscovery of self-worth empowerment through solidarity, spiritual reawakening, and negotiated agency within prevailing social norms. These findings underscore that entrepreneurship, for these women, is not merely about generating income but represents a pathway to reconstruct personal meaning, social belonging, and spiritual alignment.

By highlighting the emotional and relational dimensions of entrepreneurial learning, the study advances current understandings of empowerment as a lived and evolving journey. It challenges conventional evaluation models that prioritize functional metrics by instead centering women's voices and contextual interpretations. The insights suggest that program designers and policymakers should consider integrating psychological, communal, and spiritual aspects into entrepreneurship initiatives to foster more holistic development.

While the findings offer valuable qualitative insight, the study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a specific cultural and geographic context, which may affect the transferability of results. Future research could benefit from longitudinal designs or comparative studies across diverse regions. Nonetheless, this research contributes to rethinking empowerment frameworks by revealing the transformative potential of enterprise rooted in women's everyday experiences and identity formation.



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### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, entrepreneurship has been increasingly recognized as a driver of economic development, especially in low- and middle-income countries where small-scale businesses contribute to poverty alleviation and community resilience (Ginting dkk., 2021; Rinawan dkk., 2021). Within this context, women's entrepreneurial participation is seen as key to both economic and social transformation (Amadu dkk., 2021). However, women in rural and marginalized settings often navigate entrepreneurship within restrictive sociocultural environments that shape how they access resources, make decisions, and define success.

Most evaluations of entrepreneurship training for women have focused on quantifiable outcomes such as income growth, business survival, or skills acquisition (Wenang dkk., 2022; Zid dkk., 2020). while neglecting less visible but equally critical internal processes of change, including shifts in identity, emotional resilience, and social meaning. . For many women, entrepreneurship is not

only an economic activity but also a path toward personal growth, identity reformation, and renewed social engagement (Cetrez dkk., 2022). These subjective dimensions of the entrepreneurial journey remain underexplored, especially within the lived realities of women from marginalized communities.

There is, therefore, a growing need to investigate how women make sense of their entrepreneurial experiences beyond functional outcomes (Cintyamina dkk., 2021; Susanto dkk., 2019). This requires a phenomenological perspective that prioritizes the meaning-making process rooted in lived experience. By focusing on the subjective narratives of women who have participated in community-based entrepreneurship training, this study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of empowerment that incorporates emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions alongside economic ones.

Research exploring individuals' lived experiences within particular socio-economic phenomena has increasingly become a vital area of inquiry, particularly in studies addressing the intersections of gender, entrepreneurship, and social transformation (Faza dkk., 2022; Rinawan dkk., 2022). The subjective dimension of women's engagement in entrepreneurship especially in post-training contexts holds valuable insights into how empowerment, identity, and social roles are interpreted and redefined. Despite this relevance, scholarly investigations have often relied on quantitative frameworks that prioritize economic outcomes over the depth of personal meaning and experiential nuance.

Traditional evaluation models frequently employ indicators such as increased revenue, business sustainability, or employment generation to assess the impact of entrepreneurship training programs (Adelia & Susanto, 2020; Palutturi dkk., 2021). While these measures provide tangible evidence of success, they are inherently limited in capturing the complexity of personal transformation, emotional growth, or shifts in self-perception that accompany entrepreneurial endeavors particularly among women navigating patriarchal or restrictive environments (Chow dkk., 2021). This methodological focus on quantifiable results has left a considerable gap in understanding how entrepreneurship is internalized as a lived and evolving experience.

Moreover, previous research tends to generalize participant experiences without sufficient attention to the diverse sociocultural contexts in which entrepreneurship is embedded (Bandzuh dkk., 2022; Widayanti dkk., 2020). Standardized surveys and structured assessments fail to account for the layered meanings women attach to their business practices, social identities, and aspirations. As a result, existing approaches fall short in illuminating the essence of the phenomenon, particularly the internal processes of meaning-making that are central to personal and social empowerment.

Given these limitations, there is a compelling need for interpretive methodologies that center the voices of participants and honor the richness of their lived realities (Panjaitan & Partasmita, 2020; Wandira dkk., 2022). Phenomenology offers such a framework by allowing researchers to explore experiences as they are perceived and interpreted by those who live them. In the context of community-based entrepreneurship training for women, a phenomenological approach enables a deeper investigation into how such programs shape not only external outcomes but also internal transformations of self-worth, agency, and spiritual consciousness.

In the discourse on women's empowerment through entrepreneurship, the dominant solutions have often centered on standardized training modules, skill acquisition programs, and financial inclusion initiatives (Has dkk., 2024). These practical approaches have contributed significantly to improving women's access to economic resources and formalizing their business activities (Kirmayer & Eric Jarvis, 2019). However, such interventions frequently rely on instrumental frameworks that assess progress through measurable indicators, with limited attention to how women experience and internalize the process of entrepreneurial transformation.

While valuable, these frameworks fall short in capturing the deeper, more subjective aspects of entrepreneurship such as changes in self-perception, emotional resilience, and redefined social identities that emerge through personal narratives and relational dynamics. The tendency to prioritize economic metrics often obscures the rich experiential layers that shape women's engagement in entrepreneurial life, particularly in culturally complex and gendered environments.

This methodological limitation highlights a significant gap in understanding the phenomenon holistically. Without exploring the internal meaning-making processes that accompany economic participation, efforts to evaluate the impact of entrepreneurship programs remain incomplete and potentially superficial (Li dkk., 2024). The absence of this depth underscores the need for alternative approaches that prioritize the lived experiences of participants rather than treating them as data points within a predetermined framework.

Phenomenology offers a compelling alternative. As a research approach grounded in the exploration of subjective experience, it enables the investigation of how women perceive, interpret, and give meaning to their entrepreneurial journeys in contextually rich and personally significant ways. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological lens, this study addresses the need to uncover the essence of transformation that occurs not just in material terms, but in how women come to see themselves, their roles, and their futures through the act of enterprise.

Several studies have explored women's experiences in entrepreneurship, particularly in contexts of economic marginalization and social constraint. These studies highlight the importance of training and support programs, but often limit their focus to behavioral outcomes or business performance. Research by (Liddle dkk., 2022) has drawn attention to identity formation and psychosocial empowerment, yet there remains limited understanding of how women interpret their personal transformation through community-based training. Theoretical discussions around empowerment and self-agency rarely include first-person perspectives that explore spiritual, emotional, and relational dimensions. As a result, the lived meaning of entrepreneurship for women in local community settings remains underexplored.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine how women micro-entrepreneurs experience personal and social transformation after participating in a community-based entrepreneurship training program. This method was chosen because it allows for deep exploration of subjective meanings and perceptions that are often overlooked in quantitative research. In addressing the previously identified knowledge gap, the study focuses on how women make sense of their evolving identities and economic roles. The use of in-depth interviews and thematic analysis supports a holistic understanding of their lived realities. Through this approach, the study provides insight into the essence of entrepreneurial empowerment beyond economic metrics.

The structure of this article is as follows: The introduction presents the social and theoretical context of the study, followed by a detailed explanation of the methodological approach. The method section outlines participant selection, data collection, and the steps of interpretative analysis. Results are organized thematically and illustrated with direct participant quotes to preserve narrative authenticity (Lipira dkk., 2019). The discussion interprets the findings in light of existing literature, and the conclusion reflects on the study's contributions, limitations, and implications for future research and practice.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of women micro-entrepreneurs following their participation in community-based entrepreneurship training (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The phenomenological design was chosen for its capacity to examine the subjective meanings and personal interpretations individuals ascribe to a particular phenomenon. Specifically, interpretative phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical tradition of Heidegger, focuses on how individuals construct meaning through their interaction with the world and others. This approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of how participants understood and internalized their personal transformations in the context of entrepreneurial development (Mahon & Mahon, 2023). The emphasis on lived experience and meaning-making aligned with the research objective of uncovering the depth and complexity of participants' post-training narratives.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were women micro-entrepreneurs who had completed a structured, community-based entrepreneurship training program within the past 12 to 24 months (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Purposive sampling was employed to select individuals who met the following inclusion criteria: (1) female, (2) aged between 25 and 55 years, (3) currently operating a microenterprise, and (4) willing to share detailed accounts of their experiences. Individuals were excluded if they had participated in multiple training programs unrelated to the community-based intervention or if they were unable to communicate effectively during interviews due to health or language barriers (O'Rourke dkk., 2021). A total of ten participants were involved, all of whom identified as female, with an average age of 38 years. Participants varied in educational background, household status, and types of businesses operated, which enriched the diversity of perspectives relevant to the studied phenomenon.

The sample size was determined based on guidance from IPA methodology, which emphasizes depth over breadth in participant selection. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), an IPA study typically includes between 6 to 10 participants to allow for in-depth idiographic analysis. A sample of ten participants in this study enabled close engagement with individual experiences while also allowing for cross-case comparison to identify patterns and divergences.

Data saturation was monitored during analysis and was considered achieved when no new themes or significant variations emerged from the last two interviews. The tenth interview confirmed the thematic consistency and interpretive sufficiency of prior data, indicating that saturation had been reached. Documentation of analytic memos and code recurrence supported this judgment, ensuring that the thematic development was both rich and adequately complete.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol developed to explore themes related to identity transformation, empowerment, and meaning-making (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Interviews were conducted face-to-face in locations chosen by participants to ensure comfort and privacy, including homes, community centers, and informal business venues. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent (Phillips, 2021). The environment was managed to minimize external disruptions and foster a supportive atmosphere. The interview guide underwent a pilot test for clarity and cultural relevance and was revised accordingly. Field notes and reflective memos were also documented to capture non-verbal cues and contextual insights.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a systematic process designed to capture emergent themes and the essence of participants' lived experiences (Iosifides, 2011, 2013). Transcripts were first read multiple times to gain familiarity and immerse in the data. Initial coding was then performed to identify meaningful units, which were grouped into categories reflecting shared experiences. These categories were iteratively examined to develop higher-order themes that illustrated the core meanings of the phenomenon (Rahiem, 2021). Thematic clustering and eidetic reduction were applied to ensure that only essential, relevant elements were retained. NVivo software supported the organization of coded data and facilitated the visual mapping of themes and subthemes. Throughout the analysis, care was taken to maintain the integrity of participants' voices and preserve the richness of their narratives.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants were informed of the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study, and written informed consent was obtained (Daly, 2007; Longhofer dkk., 2012). Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing transcripts and assigning pseudonyms to all participants. Data were securely stored in password-protected files, and access was restricted to authorized

personnel. The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards for research involving human subjects, including the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant national ethical guidelines.

## RESULTS

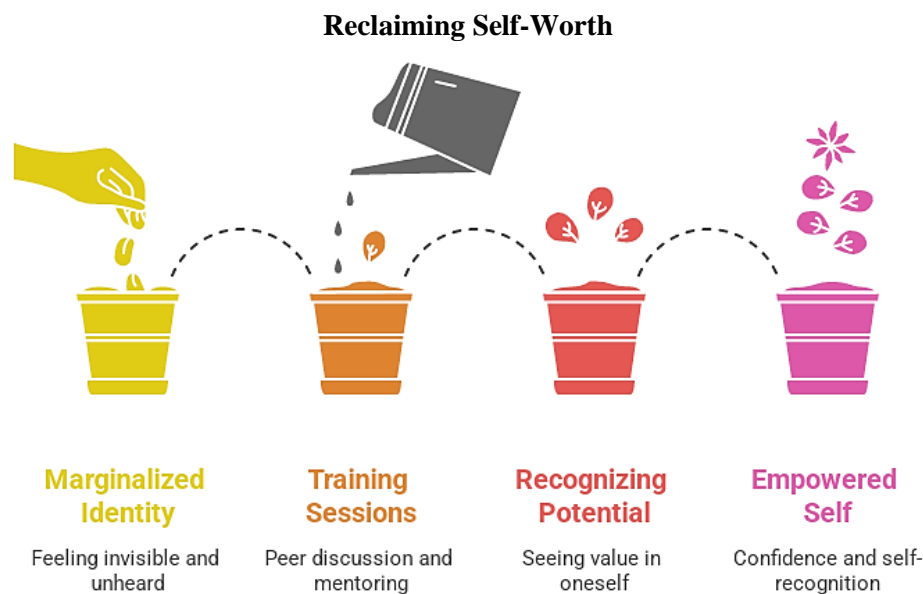
### Reclaiming Self-Worth and Personal Identity

Participants expressed that the training served as a pivotal point in rediscovering their personal value and identity, particularly after years of marginalization in both household and economic roles. Many women described a newfound sense of confidence and self-recognition.

"I never imagined I could speak in front of others, let alone talk about my business idea. But now, I see myself as someone with value," (Participant 3).

This transformation in self-perception was consistently mentioned across interviews and was often described as the first step toward empowerment. The training sessions especially those involving peer discussion and mentoring allowed participants to recognize their potential and feel seen in spaces where they had previously felt invisible.

However, not all participants experienced this transformation with the same intensity. For example, Participant 6 expressed ambivalence about her personal growth, stating, "I've learned some things, but I'm still unsure if I can really succeed. I don't feel confident yet like the others." This variation highlights that while many reclaimed a sense of self-worth, others remained in transition, navigating internal doubts and external limitations.



### Empowerment Through Shared Struggles and Sisterhood

The community-based nature of the training fostered a sense of solidarity among participants. Rather than competing, women supported one another, sharing experiences, emotional burdens, and business challenges.

"We came from different villages, but we understood each other. Our struggles were similar. It felt like gaining sisters," (Participant 5).

This sisterhood emerged as a powerful foundation for empowerment. The relational bonds established during the training often extended beyond the formal sessions, evolving into informal support networks. These networks played a crucial role in sustaining motivation and resilience in the participants' entrepreneurial journeys.

### **Spiritual Reawakening and Meaning-Making**

Many participants described the training as not merely economic in nature, but also deeply spiritual. For some, the process of learning and building something of their own was interpreted as an act of devotion or self-actualization aligned with their faith or life philosophy.

"I felt like this was more than business. It was a way to become closer to God, to prove that I can contribute to my family and community," (Participant 8).

Spiritual meaning-making was most evident among older participants, who often linked the concept of *berkah* (blessing) with the sincerity and intention behind their business efforts. The training gave them space to reflect on their life purpose and the values that guided their economic actions.

### **Negotiating Economic Agency Within Social Structures**

Participants consistently reported an increase in economic decision-making power within their households, yet this empowerment was often negotiated with prevailing gender expectations. While some were celebrated for their entrepreneurial success, others encountered resistance or skepticism from spouses or community elders.

"My husband was skeptical at first. But when I started earning, he saw things differently. Still, I have to balance everything business, home, and respect," (Participant 1).

This duality of empowerment and constraint reveals how participants navigated socio-cultural norms while asserting their economic roles. The ability to make financial contributions gave many women greater voice in household matters, though full autonomy remained contested in some contexts.

The findings illuminate a multifaceted transformation experienced by women micro-entrepreneurs after participating in community-based entrepreneurship training. Their narratives reflect not only skill acquisition but also personal and spiritual redefinition, relational bonding, and gradual shifts in power dynamics. These insights underscore the deeply subjective and contextual nature of empowerment, grounded in lived experience and communal interaction.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that community-based entrepreneurship training fosters a multidimensional transformation in women micro-entrepreneurs, encompassing personal identity reconstruction, emotional empowerment, spiritual growth, and renegotiation of social roles (shoib dkk., 2022). These outcomes provide a comprehensive response to the central research question concerning how women perceive and make meaning of their personal changes following participation in such training programs.

The results directly address the overarching research question by highlighting how participants internalized their entrepreneurial journey not merely as an economic pursuit, but as a transformative life experience. Women described the training as a turning point that enabled them to reclaim their self-worth, find solidarity in shared experiences, and reinterpret their social positions within households and communities. This study offers a unique contribution by foregrounding women's voices in articulating empowerment as a lived, evolving, and relational process an aspect that has been largely marginalized in prior evaluations that center on quantifiable outcomes.

These findings align with and expand upon existing literature in several ways. Similar to the work of (Simpson, 2021), participants in this study narrated the reconstruction of self-identity through entrepreneurship. However, this research extends the discussion by integrating the spiritual and socio-cultural contexts that shape these experiences, as emphasized by (Soehl, 2020), who noted the psychosocial dimensions of community training. Moreover, while (Sumbulah, 2019) argued for a narrative-based evaluation of entrepreneurship, this study operationalizes such a call through an interpretative phenomenological framework that captures the essence of transformation as narrated by

participants themselves. These insights reinforce the need to reframe empowerment not as a fixed outcome but as an unfolding experience rooted in personal meaning-making.

Nonetheless, the interpretation of empowerment as a uniformly positive trajectory may warrant further scrutiny. While most participants reported beneficial outcomes, at least two narratives hinted at ambivalence and persistent struggle, suggesting that the process of empowerment is not linear and may involve setbacks or internal conflicts. This complexity invites alternative readings that consider entrepreneurship training not only as a space for growth but also as a site of pressure to conform to external narratives of success. Additionally, the possibility that some women may have emphasized empowerment discourses to align with perceived expectations of the interviewer cannot be fully discounted, particularly given the social desirability bias inherent in self-report methodologies.

The findings of this study carry both theoretical and practical implications. Socially and culturally, the narratives of the women micro-entrepreneurs demonstrate that empowerment is not merely an economic condition, but a deeply embedded process of personal recognition and relational renegotiation. The results emphasize the importance of designing entrepreneurship programs that prioritize not just technical knowledge, but also psychological support, community-building elements, and space for spiritual reflection. In broader professional contexts, these insights may inform development practitioners, NGOs, and policy-makers to reconsider metrics of success in women's entrepreneurship, shifting from purely economic indicators to more holistic markers of personal growth and transformation.

However, the extent to which these findings can inform policy beyond the studied setting requires caution. The cultural context shaped by specific gender norms, religious frameworks, and communal values likely influenced how empowerment was experienced and expressed. Transferability to other cultural or urban environments may thus be limited unless similar structural and spiritual dynamics are present. Moreover, while the study foregrounds interpretive richness, it does so at the expense of generalizability. Readers and practitioners should be careful not to universalize these insights without attending to local variations in entrepreneurial ecosystems, familial expectations, and support structures.

Despite its contributions, this study presents certain limitations that must be acknowledged. The research was conducted with a small, purposively selected group of women within a specific cultural and geographical context, which may limit the transferability of findings to different settings. The use of a single method interpretative phenomenological interviews provides depth but not breadth, and may exclude voices that experience entrepreneurship differently. Additionally, participant self-reporting may be influenced by memory, social desirability, or contextual biases that shape how experiences are articulated.

Future research could build upon these findings by exploring similar phenomena in more diverse populations, including younger or unmarried women, or those engaged in different types of entrepreneurial ecosystems. Longitudinal studies may also help track how personal transformations evolve over time and how training programs sustain or diminish their impact. Moreover, combining phenomenological insights with participatory or action-based methodologies could further bridge the gap between understanding experiences and designing responsive, context-sensitive interventions in entrepreneurial development.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored how women micro-entrepreneurs experience personal transformation after participating in community-based entrepreneurship training. The findings reveal that empowerment extends beyond economic gains to include shifts in self-worth, social identity, and spiritual meaning. Participants described their entrepreneurial journey as a deeply personal process marked by growth, solidarity, and renewed purpose. These insights address the limitations of previous studies that focused solely on measurable outcomes, offering a richer understanding of empowerment

through lived experience. The study contributes to the discourse on inclusive entrepreneurship by highlighting the importance of subjective narratives in evaluating program impact.

Based on these insights, several practical implications emerge. First, policymakers and program designers should incorporate psychosocial and cultural dimensions into entrepreneurship curricula, including structured peer support, reflective dialogue, and space for spiritual or values-based exploration. These elements can amplify the internal transformation process and enhance long-term engagement. Second, monitoring and evaluation frameworks should move beyond economic indicators to include qualitative assessments of identity shifts, confidence, and relational empowerment, especially in rural or marginalized communities.

For future research, longitudinal designs are strongly recommended to trace the durability of personal transformation over time and identify critical inflection points in the empowerment journey. Comparative studies across geographic, generational, or religious contexts could reveal how sociocultural factors mediate the impact of entrepreneurship training. Additionally, integrating participatory and co-creative research methods may not only deepen empirical insights but also empower women as active agents in shaping the very programs intended to support them.

Ultimately, this study underscores the need for a more holistic approach to women's entrepreneurship one that values meaning-making as much as metrics, and transformation as much as transaction.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All ethical guidelines were strictly followed, and the research was conducted independently without any influence from the funding organization.

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