

**Research Article****Assessing the Impact of Women's Empowerment on Humanitarian Development in Somalia.**Ifrah Abdi Yusuf¹

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Daha International University, *Faculty of arts and social science, Depart: Public administration*, Mogadishu, Benadir, Somalia.

Email address: Ifka4656@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between women's empowerment and humanitarian development outcomes in Somalia, focusing on how economic participation, educational access, and decision-making inclusion influence community resilience and household well-being. Using a correlational research design, data were collected from 432 women across six regions of Somalia through standardized self-report measures. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic and study variables, while Pearson correlation and multiple regression were used for inferential analysis. Results indicated that women's economic empowerment significantly predicted household food security ($B = 0.687, p < .001, \beta = 0.542$), suggesting that women with access to income-generating activities and financial services report higher levels of household resilience. Educational attainment was found to mediate the relationship between empowerment programming and leadership participation (indirect effect = 0.254, $p = .012$), implying that education serves as a critical pathway for women's engagement in humanitarian decision-making. Moderation analysis showed that exposure to gender-based violence significantly weakened the positive effects of economic empowerment on well-being outcomes ($B = -0.378, p = .008$), highlighting the need for integrated protection and livelihoods programming. These findings demonstrate that women's empowerment is not merely a gender equality objective but a fundamental driver of humanitarian development in Somalia.

Keywords: *Women's empowerment, Humanitarian development, Somalia, Economic participation, Gender equality*

Introduction

Humanitarian development in fragile and conflict-affected states requires approaches that address both immediate survival needs and long-term resilience building. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2024), Somalia remains one of the world's most complex humanitarian crises, with an estimated 6.9 million people in need of assistance due to the compounding effects of climate shocks, conflict, displacement, and economic instability. Traditional humanitarian responses have often treated affected populations as passive recipients of aid, yet growing evidence suggests that empowering marginalized groups particularly women can transform humanitarian outcomes by leveraging local knowledge, strengthening social networks, and enhancing community ownership of recovery processes (Inter-Agency Standing Committee [IASC], 2023).

Women's empowerment refers to the process by which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices and exercise control over resources, agency, and outcomes (Kabeer, 2021). In humanitarian contexts, empowerment encompasses multiple dimensions: economic participation (access to livelihoods, savings, and credit), educational attainment (literacy, skills training, and formal schooling), decision-making authority (participation in household and community governance), and protection from violence (freedom from gender-based harm). Individuals with high empowerment are typically better positioned to cope with shocks, advocate for their families' needs, and contribute to community recovery (UN Women, 2024). In contrast, women with low empowerment often face restricted mobility, limited access to information and resources, and exclusion from decision-making forums that shape humanitarian responses.

Globally, the evidence base linking women's empowerment to humanitarian outcomes is growing. The World Bank (2023) estimates that closing gender gaps in employment and entrepreneurship could increase global GDP by up to 12% while simultaneously reducing poverty and improving child nutrition. In post-conflict settings, women's participation in peacebuilding has been associated with a 64% increase in the probability of durable peace (O'Reilly & Ó Súilleabháin, 2022). However, most existing research has been conducted in stable, middle-income contexts, with limited attention to the unique challenges of fragile states like Somalia, where institutional capacity is weak, traditional gender norms are deeply entrenched, and humanitarian needs are acute.

Somalia presents a particularly compelling case for examining the intersection of women's empowerment and humanitarian development. The country has experienced over three decades of conflict, punctuated by recurrent droughts, floods, and locust infestations that have eroded livelihoods and displaced millions (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2025). Recent initiatives including the World Bank's Rajo

Kaaba ("Building Hope") program, FAO's gender-inclusive climate resilience projects, and the Somali Disaster Management Agency's (SoDMA) Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group represent efforts to operationalize women's empowerment as a humanitarian strategy (World Bank, 2025; FAO, 2025; SoDMA, 2025). Nevertheless, empirical evidence on the impact of these programs remains limited, and significant gaps persist in understanding how different dimensions of empowerment contribute to humanitarian outcomes.

The humanitarian development landscape in Somalia has undergone significant transformation in recent years. The Somali Disaster Management Agency (SoDMA) has led a national push to integrate women's leadership into the country's humanitarian framework, culminating in the official launch of the Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group in late 2025 (SoDMA, 2025). This landmark initiative, developed in partnership with UN Women and the Somali NGO Consortium, aims to place women's organizations at the heart of humanitarian response. As SoDMA Commissioner Mohamud Moallim Abdulle stated, "By placing women's organizations at the heart of our efforts, we are not just providing aid; we are tapping into a powerful, often overlooked, force for building national resilience and sustainable development" (SoDMA, 2025, para. 4).

Despite these policy advances, persistent barriers continue to constrain women's empowerment in Somalia. A recent assessment conducted by Plan International across six districts in December 2025 found that while women are increasingly shouldering primary responsibility for sustaining their families during drought engaging in petty trade, domestic labor, and firewood collection they continue to face limited access to finance and assets, restricted movement due to insecurity and social norms, and systematic exclusion from community decision-making (Plan International, 2026). The assessment also highlighted increased protection risks: 60% of women reported frequent conflict exposure, particularly around water points and in crowded displacement settlements, while girls face heightened threats of sexual violence and early marriage pressures that contribute to a 49.6% school dropout rate (Plan International, 2026).

These challenges coexist with remarkable resilience and adaptive capacity. Women in Somalia have developed informal savings groups (Ayuto/Hagbad) and adaptive livelihood strategies that sustain their families despite economic hardship (Plan International, 2026). UN Action's projects have demonstrated that culturally grounded, survivor-centered approaches can successfully support women formerly associated with armed groups many of whom are survivors of conflict-related sexual violence to regain agency and rebuild their lives. One such project, implemented by IOM and UNSOM between April 2020 and March 2021, reached approximately 230 women in Baidoa and Kismayo, resulting in a 93% increase in access to loans among participants and a rise in satisfaction with economic status from 35% to 96% (UN Action, 2021).

The economic potential of women's empowerment has attracted significant investment from international partners. In August 2025, FAO secured funding from the Government of Canada for a groundbreaking initiative titled "Scaling Up Gender-Inclusive and Climate-Resilient Livelihoods in Somalia" (FAO, 2025). This project adopts a gender-transformative approach, simultaneously addressing gender barriers and climate vulnerabilities to unlock agricultural potential. As Janine Cocker, Head of Cooperation at the Embassy of Canada to Somalia, noted, "Investing in gender equality and climate action isn't just the right thing to do, it's one of the most effective ways to drive sustainable development and strengthen resilience for communities dependent on agricultural livelihoods" (FAO, 2025, para. 6).

Educational empowerment represents another critical pathway. The World Bank-supported Rajo Kaaba project has enabled over 2,700 Somali girls to access higher education and technical training, with the goal of equipping more than 40,000 women, girls, and youths with technical and vocational (TVET) skills (World Bank, 2025). Recipients like Ilhan Ali Abdullahi, who grew up in the small town of Ceelguula in Galmudug state, are now pursuing nursing and midwifery degrees with the goal of serving their communities. "This wasn't just for me," Ilhan reflects. "It was for my family and for every girl in my neighborhood who thinks she can't make it" (World Bank, 2025, para. 8). Similarly, UNICEF has rolled out an adolescent girls' curriculum across Somalia a 13-session program focused on socio-emotional skills, sexual and reproductive health, safety from violence, and future planning co-created with local youth- and women-led organizations to ensure cultural relevance (UNICEF, 2025).

Small-scale livelihoods support has demonstrated tangible impacts on household resilience. IOM Somalia's interventions in Baidoa and Dollow, implemented with support from the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and the European Union, have enabled displaced women to establish shops, permagardens, and small businesses (IOM, 2025). Recipients like Fadumo Ibrahim transformed half-empty shops into fully stocked enterprises, while Lukay Ibrahim Hassan moved from collecting firewood and washing clothes to running a successful shop with a refrigerator (IOM, 2025). Local partners have observed visible changes: women are more financially independent, more involved in household decision-making, and more respected in their communities (IOM, 2025).

Despite these promising initiatives, research gaps remain substantial. First, few studies have quantitatively examined the causal pathways through which women's empowerment influences humanitarian development outcomes in Somalia. Second, the mediating role of specific empowerment dimensions such as education, economic participation, and protection from violence has not been adequately tested. Third, the interaction between empowerment programming and persistent structural barriers, including gender-based violence and exclusion from decision-making, requires further investigation. This study seeks to fill these gaps by examining the relationship between women's empowerment and humanitarian development

outcomes, with attention to the mediating role of educational attainment and the moderating influence of protection risks.

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of this study was to examine the influence of women's empowerment on humanitarian development outcomes among communities in Somalia, within the context of ongoing climate shocks, displacement, and humanitarian response. Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. Determine the relationship between women's economic empowerment and household food security among displaced and drought-affected communities.
2. Examine whether educational attainment mediates the relationship between empowerment programming and women's participation in humanitarian decision-making.
3. Assess whether exposure to gender-based violence moderates the relationship between economic empowerment and household well-being outcomes.
4. Explore regional differences in women's empowerment and humanitarian development indicators across Somalia.

Material and Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, correlational research design to explore the relationships among women's economic empowerment, educational attainment, protection from violence, and humanitarian development outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The correlational design was appropriate as it allowed the researcher to examine naturally occurring relationships across different programmatic contexts without manipulating variables, which is ideal when studying complex social processes in humanitarian settings.

Population of the Study

The target population comprised women aged 18 to 60 years living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, peri-urban settlements, and rural communities across six regions of Somalia: Banadir (Mogadishu), Southwest State (Baidoa), Jubaland (Kismayo), Hirshabelle (Jowhar), Galmudug (Galkayo), and Somaliland (Hargeisa). These regions were selected due to their diverse humanitarian profiles, ranging from active conflict zones to drought-affected pastoral areas to urban displacement contexts (OCHA, 2024). The population included women who had received some form of empowerment intervention (e.g., livelihoods training, scholarship support, savings group participation) as well as those who had not, to enable comparative analysis.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A sample of 450 women was selected using stratified random sampling (Taherdoost, 2018). First, regions were stratified based on humanitarian context (conflict-affected, drought-affected, urban displacement, and stable/peri-urban). Next, districts and IDP settlements within each region were randomly selected. Within each settlement, households were systematically sampled, and one woman per household was invited to participate. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, assuming a target population of approximately 50,000 women across the six regions, and was adjusted to 450 to enable subgroup analyses by region and program participation status. A total of 432 women provided complete data suitable for analysis (96% completion rate).

Instruments for Data Collection

1) Women's Economic Empowerment Scale (WEES): Adapted from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) developed by Alkire et al. (2022), this scale measures women's access to and control over economic resources, including income generation, savings and credit participation, asset ownership, and employment status. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (No access/control) to 5 (Full access/control). The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency in East African contexts (Cronbach's alpha = .87) (Alkire et al., 2022).

2) Household Food Security Scale (HFSS): Based on the Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance (FANTA) Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (Coates et al., 2023), this instrument measures food security across four domains: food availability, access, utilization, and stability over the preceding 30 days. It contains 9 items scored on a frequency scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). The scale has been validated in Somali humanitarian contexts (Cronbach's alpha = .89) (Coates et al., 2023).

3) Educational Attainment and Participation Scale (EAPS): Developed for this study based on UNICEF (2024) educational empowerment frameworks, this scale measures formal schooling completion, literacy, skills training participation, and engagement in leadership or decision-making roles. Items assess both educational history (e.g., "What is the highest level of education you have completed?") and current participation (e.g., "How often do you participate in community meetings or decisions?"). The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability in pilot testing (Cronbach's alpha = .82).

4) Gender-Based Violence Exposure Scale (GBVES): Adapted from the WHO Violence Against Women Instrument (García-Moreno et al., 2022), this scale measures lifetime and recent (past 12 months) exposure to physical, sexual, and emotional violence, as well as help-seeking behaviors and safety perceptions. Due to the sensitivity of this topic, items were administered by trained female enumerators in private settings following established ethical protocols (Ellsberg et al., 2021).

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over an eight-week period between January and February 2026. Enumerators were Somali women recruited from local women's organizations and trained in ethical data collection

procedures, including trauma-informed approaches, confidentiality protocols, and referral pathways for participants disclosing violence (Ellsberg et al., 2021). Interviews were conducted in Somali language and lasted approximately 50–60 minutes. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with particular attention to ensuring that consent was voluntary and not influenced by humanitarian aid distribution. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the relevant institutional ethics review board.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 28.0 and the PROCESS macro for mediation and moderation analysis (Hayes, 2022). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages) summarized demographic characteristics and key study variables. Pearson product-moment correlation examined bivariate relationships among empowerment dimensions, protection factors, and humanitarian outcomes (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Mediation was tested using PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals (Hayes, 2022). Moderation by GBV exposure was tested using PROCESS macro (Model 1), with simple slopes analysis to interpret significant interactions (Aiken & West, 2021). An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

A total of 432 women provided complete data suitable for analysis (96% completion rate from the target sample of 450). The mean age of participants was 34.7 years (SD = 11.2, range 18–60). Regarding displacement status, 58.1% (n = 251) were internally displaced persons (IDPs), 22.7% (n = 98) were resident community members, 12.0% (n = 52) were returnees (formerly displaced, now returned), and 7.2% (n = 31) were pastoralist women. Marital status distribution was as follows: 45.4% (n = 196) married, 23.1% (n = 100) widowed, 18.5% (n = 80) divorced/separated, and 13.0% (n = 56) never married. Household headship was female-headed in 52.3% (n = 226) of cases.

Educational attainment was low overall: 43.5% (n = 188) had no formal education, 28.0% (n = 121) had some primary education (grades 1-4), 16.2% (n = 70) completed primary school (grades 5-8), 8.6% (n = 37) had some secondary education, and only 3.7% (n = 16) had completed secondary school or higher. Regarding program participation, 38.9% (n = 168) had participated in livelihoods or skills training, 24.3% (n = 105) in savings or microcredit groups, 18.1% (n = 78) in educational scholarships, and 14.1% (n = 61) in leadership or advocacy training. The remaining 31.9% (n = 138) reported no prior empowerment program participation.

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Possible Range	Actual Range	Skewness
Economic Empowerment	2.56	0.89	1.00–5.00	1.00–4.75	0.12
Household Food Security	2.38	0.94	1.00–5.00	1.00–4.67	0.28

Educational Attainment	1.87	1.02	1.00–5.00	1.00–4.50	0.67
Decision-Making Participation	2.12	0.97	1.00–5.00	1.00–4.25	0.41
GBV Exposure (Lifetime)	3.24	1.21	1.00–5.00	1.00–5.00	-0.23

Mean scores indicated moderate to low levels of economic empowerment and food security, with GBV exposure showing relatively higher prevalence. Skewness values within acceptable ranges (± 1.0) suggested approximately normal distributions suitable for parametric analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

Research Question 1: Does Women's Economic Empowerment Significantly Predict Household Food Security?

Table 1: Direct Effect of Economic Empowerment on Household Food Security

Predictor	Estimate (B)	SE	t	p	95% CI	Std. Estimate (β)
Economic Empowerment → Food Security	0.687	0.052	13.21	<.001	[0.585, 0.789]	0.542

Table 1 reveals a significant positive effect of women's economic empowerment on household food security, $B = 0.687$, $SE = 0.052$, $t = 13.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.585, 0.789]. This suggests that women with greater access to income-generating activities, savings mechanisms, and control over economic resources report significantly higher levels of household food security. The standardized effect size ($\beta = 0.542$) indicates a strong relationship, meaning that economic empowerment accounts for approximately 54.2% of the variance in food security outcomes. This finding aligns with FAO (2025) reports that female-headed households experience higher malnutrition rates and greater food insecurity, suggesting that targeted economic empowerment interventions can effectively address these disparities.

Research Question 2: Does Educational Attainment Mediate the Relationship Between Empowerment Programming and Participation in Humanitarian Decision-Making?

Table 2: Mediation Analysis Showing the Effect of Educational Attainment on Empowerment Programming and Decision-Making

Path	Estimate (B)	SE	t	p	95% CI
Empowerment Programming → Education (a₁)	0.412	0.078	5.28	<.001	[0.259, 0.565]
Education → Decision-Making (b₁)	0.617	0.064	9.64	<.001	[0.491, 0.743]
Indirect Effect (a₁ × b₁)	0.254	0.101	2.51	.012	[0.056, 0.452]
Direct Effect (c')	0.348	0.069	5.04	<.001	[0.212, 0.484]
Total Effect (c₁ + a₁ × b₁)	0.602	0.058	10.38	<.001	[0.488, 0.716]

Table 2 reveals a significant indirect effect of empowerment programming on decision-making participation through educational attainment, $B = 0.254$, $SE = 0.101$, $t = 2.51$, $p = .012$, 95% CI [0.056, 0.452]. Since the confidence interval does not include zero, the indirect effect is statistically significant (Hayes, 2022). This means that empowerment programming influences women's participation in humanitarian decision-making both directly and indirectly through the pathway of educational attainment. The direct path from empowerment programming to decision-making remained significant ($B = 0.348$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. That is, programs that improve women's education whether through formal schooling, literacy classes, or skills training simultaneously enhance their capacity and confidence to participate in community governance.

This finding is consistent with UNICEF (2025) observation that "when we invest in girls, we invest in a better future for everyone" (para. 3). It also aligns with the World Bank (2025) Rajo Kaaba findings, which show that scholarship recipients not only gain professional skills but also emerge as community leaders and role models.

Research Question 3: Does Exposure to Gender-Based Violence Moderate the Relationship Between Economic Empowerment and Household Well-Being?

Table 3: Moderation Analysis: Interaction Between Economic Empowerment and GBV Exposure

Predictor		Estimate (B)	SE	t	p	95% CI	Std. Estimate (β)
Economic Empowerment → Well-Being (c ₁)		0.534	0.067	7.97	<.001	[0.402, 0.666]	0.421
GBV Exposure (standardized)		-0.289	0.061	-4.74	<.001	[-0.409, 0.169]	-0.298
Empowerment (Interaction) × GBV		-0.378	0.142	-2.66	.008	[-0.657, 0.099]	-0.326

Table 3 reveals that the interaction term between economic empowerment and GBV exposure was statistically significant, $B = -0.378$, $SE = 0.142$, $t = -2.66$, $p = .008$, 95% CI [-0.657, -0.099]. The negative interaction coefficient indicates that exposure to gender-based violence significantly reduces the positive effect of economic empowerment on household well-being outcomes (Aiken & West, 2021). In other words, the benefits of economic empowerment for household well-being are substantially weaker for women who have experienced GBV.

Table 4: Conditional Effects of Economic Empowerment on Well-Being by GBV Exposure Level

GBV Exposure Level	Effect of Empowerment on Well-Being	SE	t	p	95% CI	Std. Estimate (β)
Low GBV (SD)	(-1) 0.725	0.089	8.15	<.001	[0.550, 0.900]	0.571
Moderate GBV (Mean)	0.534	0.067	7.97	<.001	[0.402, 0.666]	0.421

High GBV (+1 SD)	0.289	0.098	2.95	.003	[0.096, 0.482]	0.228
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As shown in Table 4, the conditional effect of economic empowerment on well-being was strongest for women with low GBV exposure ($B = 0.725, p < .001, \beta = 0.571$), moderate for those with average exposure ($B = 0.534, p < .001, \beta = 0.421$), and significantly attenuated for women with high GBV exposure ($B = 0.289, p = .003, \beta = 0.228$). Women with high GBV exposure derived approximately 60% less benefit from economic empowerment compared to women with low exposure. This finding underscores the critical importance of integrated programming that addresses protection alongside livelihoods, as documented by Plan International (2026), which found that 60% of women reported frequent conflict exposure and increased protection risks are driving school dropout rates of nearly 50% among girls.

Discussion of Findings

The first research question examined the direct effect between women's economic empowerment and household food security among communities in Somalia. The result revealed a significant positive effect ($B = 0.687, p < .001$), with a standardized estimate ($\beta = 0.542$) indicating a strong relationship. This suggests that women with greater access to income-generating activities, savings mechanisms, and control over economic resources report significantly higher levels of household food security.

This finding aligns with a growing body of evidence from humanitarian contexts across Africa. The FAO (2025) has documented that female-headed households in Somalia experience disproportionately higher rates of malnutrition and food insecurity, primarily due to systemic barriers in accessing productive resources. The World Bank (2025) similarly notes that "persistent gender disparities in access to productive resources have limited food production and worsened nutrition outcomes" (p. 4). The current findings suggest that targeted economic empowerment interventions can effectively address these disparities by enabling women to purchase food, invest in agricultural inputs, and smooth consumption during lean seasons (Quisumbing et al., 2021).

The magnitude of the effect is noteworthy. With a standardized coefficient of 0.542, economic empowerment explains over half of the variance in food security outcomes, comparable to findings from IOM (2025) livelihood interventions in Baidoa and Dollow. In those programs, women who received small grants, permagarden training, and business skills saw dramatic transformations. Local partners reported that women became "more financially independent, more involved in household decision-making, and more respected in their communities" (IOM, 2025, para. 8). These findings are also consistent with UN Action (2021) evaluation of women's empowerment programming in Somalia, which documented that among participants, "access to loans increased by 93%, satisfaction with their economic status rose from 35% to 96%, and reliable income access expanded from 24% to 92%" (p. 12).

The second research question investigated the mediation effect of educational attainment in the relationship between empowerment programming and participation in humanitarian decision-making. The mediation analysis indicated a significant indirect effect ($B = 0.254$, $p = .012$), alongside a significant direct effect ($B = 0.348$, $p < .001$). This implies partial mediation, meaning empowerment programming influences decision-making both directly and indirectly through educational attainment.

This finding has significant implications for program design. It suggests that while livelihoods support alone can increase women's participation in some contexts, the most substantial and sustained gains come from interventions that explicitly build human capital through education and skills development (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). The World Bank (2025) Rajo Kaaba project exemplifies this approach: by providing scholarships for nursing, midwifery, and education degrees, the program not only equips women with professional skills but also positions them as leaders within their communities. UNICEF (2025) adolescent girls' curriculum, rolled out across six regions of Somalia, takes a similar approach. Facilitators reported that the training increased their ability "to facilitate sessions with these girls in a way that I can connect with them than before" and enhanced their confidence (UNICEF, 2025, para. 6).

The mediation finding also resonates with the broader literature on women's leadership in conflict-affected settings. Research by O'Reilly and Ó Súilleabháin (2022) found that women's participation in peacebuilding processes increased the durability of peace agreements by 64%, primarily because women bring different perspectives and priorities to decision-making tables. However, participation without preparation without the educational foundation to articulate needs, analyze options, and advocate effectively may yield limited results (Kabeer, 2021). The current findings suggest that educational attainment serves as a critical "capability multiplier" that amplifies the impact of other empowerment interventions (Nussbaum, 2022).

The third research question estimated the moderating effect of GBV exposure on the relationship between economic empowerment and household well-being. The moderation analysis found a significant negative interaction ($B = -0.378$, $p = .008$), indicating that GBV exposure substantially attenuates the benefits of economic empowerment. This finding carries urgent programmatic implications.

Somalia's protection landscape is dire. Plan International (2026) assessment found that "60% of women reported frequent conflict exposure especially around water points, in unlit shelters and across crowded displacement settlements" (p. 5). Girls face "heightened threats of sexual violence, early marriage pressures and limited menstrual hygiene support factors driving a 49.6% school dropout rate" (Plan International, 2026, p. 6). The SoDMA (2025) coordinated GiHA Working Group explicitly recognizes that "women are not merely beneficiaries, but indispensable partners in resilience and recovery" (para. 3),

yet the protection risks they face systematically undermine their capacity to benefit from economic programming.

The conditional effects shown in Table 4 are particularly striking: women with high GBV exposure derive approximately 60% less benefit from economic empowerment compared to women with low exposure ($B = 0.289$ vs. 0.725). This suggests that for women experiencing ongoing violence, income generation alone is insufficient; without safety, dignity, and psychosocial support, the returns to economic investment are substantially diminished (Stark et al., 2023). This finding aligns with UN Action (2021) approach, which explicitly links "CRSV recovery with economic reintegration and prevention of violent extremism" (p. 4). Their project for women formerly associated with armed groups combined psychosocial recovery including arts and crafts, poetry-based expression, sports, and traditional rituals with business development and livelihood skills training. This integrated model recognizes that healing and empowerment must proceed in parallel; one cannot be sacrificed for the other (Jewkes et al., 2022).

The findings also align with the IOM (2025) Xaldoon project, which provides "women with more than financial support. It combines business training, financial literacy, and home gardening skills to help women grow their income and food sources from within their homes" (para. 4). By embedding livelihoods support within a protective, community-based framework, these programs reduce women's exposure to violence while building their economic capacity a synergistic approach that the moderation findings suggest is superior to either intervention alone (Ellsberg et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This study confirms that women's empowerment is a significant and positive predictor of humanitarian development outcomes in Somalia, including household food security, decision-making participation, and overall well-being. Educational attainment mediates the relationship between empowerment programming and leadership participation, underscoring the importance of human capital investments. Critically, exposure to gender-based violence significantly moderates the effectiveness of economic empowerment, reducing its benefits by up to 60% and highlighting the necessity of integrated programming that addresses protection and livelihoods simultaneously.

The findings both affirm and extend existing literature, offering novel empirical evidence from one of the world's most complex humanitarian settings (OCHA, 2024). They demonstrate that women's empowerment is not merely a gender equality objective or a "nice to have" addition to humanitarian programming, but a fundamental driver of resilience, food security, and sustainable development (UN Women, 2024). The launch of the GiHA Working Group (SoDMA, 2025), the expansion of scholarship programs like Rajo Kaaba (World Bank, 2025), and the rollout of gender-transformative initiatives by FAO (2025) and IOM (2025) represent important policy and programmatic steps in the right direction.

However, these efforts must be scaled substantially and integrated with protection services to reach the women who are most vulnerable and most in need.

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and the correlational findings should be interpreted as associations rather than definitive causal effects. The sample, while large and geographically diverse, may not be fully representative of all Somali women, particularly those in areas inaccessible due to active conflict. Self-report data on sensitive topics such as GBV exposure may be subject to underreporting due to stigma and safety concerns (Ellsberg et al., 2021). Future research should employ longitudinal designs to establish causal direction, qualitative methods to explore mechanisms and context, and participatory approaches that center Somali women's voices in the research process.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Scale integrated economic empowerment and protection programming.** Given the significant positive impact of economic empowerment on food security and the moderating effect of GBV exposure, humanitarian actors in Somalia should prioritize integrated interventions that combine livelihoods support with protection services. This includes establishing safe spaces where women can access business training and savings groups alongside psychosocial support, GBV case management, and referral pathways (Stark et al., 2023). The IOM (2025) Xalfoon and UN Action (2021) models offer promising templates for scale-up.
2. **Invest in girls' education as a pathway to leadership and resilience.** Educational attainment mediates the relationship between empowerment programming and decision-making participation. Donors and implementing partners should expand scholarship programs like the World Bank (2025) Rajo Kaaba and support the rollout of UNICEF (2025) adolescent girls' curriculum to reach more girls across all regions of Somalia. Particular attention should be paid to retaining girls in school through secondary level, addressing barriers such as menstrual hygiene support, safe transportation, and protection from early marriage (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).
3. **Integrate gender-responsive approaches across all humanitarian clusters.** As SoDMA (2025) leads the national push to integrate women's leadership into Somalia's humanitarian framework, all humanitarian clusters (food security, WASH, shelter, health, protection) should adopt gender-responsive budgeting and programming. This means ensuring that women's organizations are represented in coordination mechanisms, that sex- and age-disaggregated data inform response planning, and that at least 30% of humanitarian resources are targeted to women-led interventions (IASC, 2023).

4. **Address the structural barriers that constrain women's empowerment.** The persistence of barriers limited access to finance and assets, restricted mobility, exclusion from community decision-making requires systemic approaches beyond project-level interventions (Kabeer, 2021). The Federal Government of Somalia, with support from development partners, should prioritize legal and policy reforms that strengthen women's property rights, increase representation in local governance, and criminalize gender-based violence. Traditional and religious leaders should be engaged as allies in shifting social norms that constrain women's agency (Jewkes et al., 2022).
5. **Develop and test context-appropriate measures of empowerment and well-being.** This study identified the need for validated, culturally grounded measurement tools that capture the multi-dimensional nature of women's empowerment in Somali contexts. Future research should prioritize the development and validation of Somali-language scales that assess economic empowerment, decision-making, protection, and psychosocial well-being, with attention to the specific realities of displaced, pastoralist, and conflict-affected women (Alkire et al., 2022).
6. **Increase funding for women-led and women-focused humanitarian action.** Despite rhetorical commitments to gender equality, funding for women-led organizations and women's empowerment programming in Somalia remains inadequate. Donors including bilateral agencies, UN pooled funds, and private foundations should commit to allocating a minimum of 15% of humanitarian funding to women-led organizations and 25% to activities with gender equality as a principal objective, consistent with the IASC (2023) Gender Accountability Framework.

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