

Invisible Education: The Untapped Power of Informal Learning in Women's Empowerment

Ms. Jayashree C

Assistant Professor, Commerce, Basudev Somani College

Abstract

This study explores the role of **informal learning** as an essential yet often overlooked factor in **women's empowerment**. While formal education systems often get the most attention in empowerment discourses, informal learning methods—such as community education, mentorship, and self-directed learning—have substantial potential to elevate women's social and economic status. Drawing on qualitative analysis from case studies, interviews, and secondary data, the study investigates how women in rural and marginalized urban settings leverage informal educational structures to overcome barriers to empowerment. The findings suggest that informal learning is a key driver of women's agency, particularly in contexts where formal education opportunities are limited or inaccessible. This paper contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality and education by highlighting the **untapped power of informal learning** in shaping women's empowerment in both social and economic domains.

1. Introduction

Women's empowerment is often viewed through the lens of formal education—schools, universities, and accredited institutions. However, this view overlooks the **significant contributions of informal learning** in empowering women, particularly in rural or economically disadvantaged areas. Informal education encompasses a range of non-formal methods, including learning through community networks, mentorship, online platforms, and family-based education systems. This study aims to challenge the conventional focus on formal educational structures by highlighting how **informal learning** provides unique opportunities for women to gain knowledge, skills, and social capital. The paper will also explore how informal education can be integrated into policy frameworks to enhance women's empowerment on a larger scale.

Women's empowerment is a central theme in global development discourse, often measured by indicators such as access to formal education, political representation, and economic participation. While **formal education** is widely recognized as a powerful enabler of empowerment, this traditional view overlooks the vast potential of **informal learning**—a form of education that occurs outside institutional boundaries, often embedded in daily life, social interactions, and community settings.

In many parts of the world, especially in **rural and marginalized urban areas**, formal education remains inaccessible to large numbers of women due to financial constraints, gender norms, safety concerns, or lack of infrastructure. In such contexts, women often rely on **non-institutional learning** channels to acquire knowledge and develop skills essential for survival, dignity, and progress. These informal pathways may include **peer learning circles, mentorship networks, skill-sharing within families, community workshops**, and increasingly, **digital platforms** such as YouTube, WhatsApp groups, or local radio broadcasts.

Despite its widespread presence and deep social impact, **informal learning is rarely recognized** in national education policies or development frameworks. It is often considered supplementary or secondary to formal education, when in reality, it serves as a **primary route of empowerment for millions of women**. Informal learning allows for **contextual, culturally appropriate, and need-based education**, which is often more aligned with the lived experiences and immediate goals of women than traditional curricula.

This study seeks to highlight the **untapped power of informal learning** as a driver of women's empowerment. It investigates how women leverage non-formal education mechanisms to **develop skills, gain confidence, form support systems, and achieve economic and social agency**—often in environments where formal systems have failed or excluded them. The paper also aims to contribute to the policy discourse by exploring ways in which **informal learning can be integrated or recognized** within broader educational and gender empowerment frameworks.

Through a **qualitative research approach** using case studies, interviews, and thematic analysis, this paper aims to answer the following core questions:

- How do informal learning systems operate in rural and marginalized urban contexts?
- What types of knowledge and skills do women acquire through informal education?
- How does informal learning influence women's self-perception, decision-making, and socio-economic mobility?

By focusing on the **lived realities of women**, this paper not only elevates the legitimacy of informal education but also calls for its **systematic inclusion in empowerment strategies**, especially in the Global South.

2. Review of Literature

The review of literature is structured around three key theoretical frameworks: Informal Learning Theory, the Women's Empowerment Framework, and Social Capital Theory. Each framework is discussed with direct reference to recent studies that exemplify or expand upon these ideas.

2.1 Informal Learning Theory

Informal learning is defined by its adaptability, contextual relevance, and learner-driven nature. According to **Eraut (2000)**, informal learning typically occurs in unstructured environments such as homes, workplaces, or community spaces and is fueled by practical needs and social interaction. This view is particularly relevant to women in rural settings who often lack access to formal institutions but still acquire valuable skills through life experience and peer exchange.

Expanding on this, **Kumar & Sharma (2020)** observed that rural women in India acquired livelihood-enhancing skills such as tailoring and home-based food production through everyday interactions rather than structured training. Their findings reinforce Eraut's assertion that informal education is not only present but **instrumental in improving economic outcomes**.

Similarly, **Sen & Banerjee (2018)** found that women who participated in community learning circles—though unaccredited—demonstrated better decision-making capabilities and self-confidence than those who only received formal literacy training. These insights validate informal learning as a legitimate pathway to empowerment.

2.2 Women's Empowerment Framework

Amartya Sen (1999) defined empowerment as the expansion of individuals' capabilities and choices. His framework emphasized education, agency, and access to resources. However, **Nussbaum (2000)** extended

this argument by recognizing that empowerment is not solely achieved through formal systems. Informal methods—such as mentorship, peer support, and self-learning—can be equally transformative, particularly for women facing social and structural constraints.

For example, **Choudhury & Singh (2022)** explored how informal learning environments (like peer mentorship and apprenticeship) directly contributed to the entrepreneurial journeys of women with no formal business training. Their study revealed that **over 70% of women entrepreneurs credited their business skills to informal support systems**, not institutional education.

Kabeer (2019) also highlighted that empowerment must consider cultural context. She argued that women often negotiate agency within the boundaries of social norms, and informal education provides a more culturally acceptable route for skill-building and leadership—especially in conservative or patriarchal communities.

2.3 Social Capital and Community Learning

Coleman (1988) argued that social capital—defined as the value derived from social relationships—can significantly impact educational and empowerment outcomes. When applied to women’s learning, this theory suggests that informal networks can be more impactful than isolated academic achievements.

Supporting this, **Das & Roy (2021)** found that women involved in community-driven education programs gained not only skills but also social credibility and leadership roles within their villages. These networks created new opportunities for participation in local governance and small business activities.

Likewise, **Verma & Nair (2022)** examined how peer learning groups function as catalysts for empowerment. Their study noted that **women who participated in informal group sessions were three times more likely to initiate income-generating activities** than those who learned alone.

Patel & Joshi (2023) introduced a digital perspective, observing that urban women increasingly use online platforms for informal learning, particularly in areas like financial literacy, health education, and professional development. This shift illustrates the **evolving role of digital communities** in building social capital for women across socio-economic contexts.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative research design** using **case study analysis** and **semi-structured interviews** to explore the impact of informal learning on women's empowerment. Data was collected from women in **rural areas** and **marginalized urban communities** who have participated in informal education programs such as community workshops, mentoring groups, or self-learning platforms. Secondary data, including reports from organizations like **UN Women** and **The World Bank**, were also analyzed to provide a broader context for informal learning’s impact on empowerment. The study employed thematic analysis to identify key themes related to **skills acquisition, confidence-building, and economic empowerment**.

3.1 Research Design

The study follows an **exploratory multiple-case study design**, focusing on diverse geographic and socio-economic contexts to capture a wide spectrum of informal learning practices. This design enables comparative analysis across different environments (e.g., rural villages, urban slums, tribal settlements) while maintaining a grounded understanding of each context.

3.2 Sampling Technique

A **purposive sampling** method was used to identify participants who were actively engaged in informal learning activities. The sample included women who had not completed formal schooling but were:

- Running small home-based businesses,
- Participating in community workshops or skill training groups,
- Using mobile phones or social media for learning,
- Mentoring or being mentored by peers,
- Involved in self-help groups or women's collectives.

A total of **30 women participants** were selected across five regions (3 rural, 2 urban), ensuring variation in age, marital status, and occupational background. Key informants such as local NGO coordinators and community leaders were also interviewed to provide supporting insights.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

a) Semi-Structured Interviews

- Conducted with all 30 participants.
- Questions focused on learning sources, types of knowledge gained, barriers faced, and perceived changes in agency and decision-making.
- Interviews were conducted in local languages and later transcribed and translated into English.

b) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

- Two FGDs were conducted in rural areas to observe collective narratives and shared learning patterns.
- These discussions revealed the importance of peer learning, oral storytelling, and collective problem-solving as informal learning tools.

c) Observations

- Field notes were taken during visits to community gatherings, self-help group meetings, and vocational workshops.
- Observations helped validate the interview data by capturing non-verbal interactions and contextual learning cues.

d) Secondary Data Review

- Reports from UN Women, World Bank, and local NGOs were analyzed to frame the socio-political context.
- Previous research studies on informal education, gender, and empowerment provided a comparative baseline for this study.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using **thematic analysis**, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase process:

1. **Familiarization** with the data through repeated readings,
2. **Initial coding** to identify meaningful data segments,
3. **Searching for themes** that captured patterns across interviews and observations,
4. **Reviewing themes** to ensure internal coherence,
5. **Defining and naming themes** such as "learning through necessity," "network-based knowledge," and "emergent confidence,"
6. **Producing the report** by linking themes to research questions and literature.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms.
- Participants were given the right to withdraw at any stage.
- Ethical clearance was sought from the researcher's academic institution.

3.6 Limitations

- The findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable.
- Some participants were hesitant to share personal experiences, especially regarding economic control and household decision-making.
- Language translation may have led to minor loss of cultural nuances.

Despite these limitations, the study provides **rich, contextual insights** into the role of informal learning in women's empowerment.

4. Findings

The findings from the fieldwork reveal the **transformative role of informal learning** in enhancing women's skills, confidence, agency, and participation in both family and community spheres. Through interviews, focus group discussions, and observational data, four dominant themes emerged:

4.1 Skill Development Through Non-Traditional Learning Channels

Many women reported acquiring critical skills through **non-institutional avenues**, including peer mentorship, family knowledge, online tutorials, and community-led workshops. These skills ranged from:

- **Tailoring and embroidery**
- **Food processing and home-based catering**
- **Mobile-based digital literacy**
- **Basic financial management**

Women emphasized that these skills were **practical, immediately applicable**, and relevant to their local economies.

"I learned how to stitch by watching my neighbor, then through WhatsApp videos. I now take small tailoring orders from three nearby villages," said a 38-year-old participant from rural Karnataka.

This informal skill development allowed several women to start small businesses, become part-time earners, or reduce dependency on male family members.

4.2 Emergence of Confidence and Personal Agency

Informal learning experiences contributed directly to an **increase in women's confidence and decision-making power**. Participants shared that as they mastered new skills and contributed to household income, they felt more respected and heard in family discussions.

Some women described this transformation as gradual:

- From "not speaking in front of others" to leading a group discussion,
- From "not touching money" to managing daily business transactions.

"I never used to speak in the village meetings. But after I started teaching other women how to make snacks for festivals, people started listening to me," said a participant from a tribal settlement in Odisha.

This shift in **self-perception and social validation** is a strong indicator of empowerment, even in the absence of formal education credentials.

4.3 Informal Learning as a Pathway to Social and Economic Networks

Informal education also facilitated women's entry into **networks of mutual support and opportunity**, including:

- **Self-help groups (SHGs)**
- **Cooperative markets**
- **Skill-sharing circles**
- **WhatsApp-based business groups**

These networks provided access to:

- New **customers** or clients,
- **Microloans** or credit,
- **Health and legal information**,
- Emotional support and shared learning.

“Joining the stitching group changed everything. One woman told me about a government loan. Another helped me apply. Now I help others,” said a 29-year-old woman in Jaipur.

This collective engagement helped **expand women's social capital**, enabling them to influence local decisions, access financial resources, and develop leadership skills.

4.4 Barriers to Informal Learning and Empowerment

While the impact was largely positive, several **challenges emerged**:

- **Cultural norms** that discouraged women from learning outside the home or interacting with strangers,
- **Time constraints** due to domestic responsibilities,
- **Digital illiteracy**, especially for older women, restricting access to mobile-based learning,
- Lack of **formal recognition or certification**, limiting further growth.

“I know how to make pickles and jam, but without a certificate, no shop agrees to sell my items,” shared one urban participant.

These barriers point to the need for **hybrid models** that bridge informal and formal learning systems — such as community-endorsed skill certificates or NGO-led training validation programs.

4.5 Perceived Outcomes of Informal Learning

Women across different backgrounds expressed several **positive outcomes** of engaging in informal learning:

- Greater **mobility** and participation in community events,
- Better **financial control** (handling money, saving, spending independently),
- Enhanced **status within the household**,
- Reduced feelings of **isolation and helplessness**.

Some participants noted that their daughters were inspired by them, indicating **intergenerational empowerment** potential.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm that **informal education plays a crucial role in empowering women**, especially in contexts where access to formal education is limited. By fostering skill development and building social capital, informal learning contributes to both personal growth and community-level transformation. These observations align closely with **Amartya Sen's (1999)** theory of empowerment, which highlights the expansion of individual capabilities as a pathway to social and economic advancement. Through informal learning, women gain not only practical knowledge but also the **confidence and autonomy** necessary to challenge traditional gender roles and participate actively in economic, familial, and civic domains.

Moreover, the study underscores the **urgent need for policy-level support** to integrate informal learning into national education and empowerment strategies. In many low-resource settings, formal education systems remain out of reach for large segments of the female population due to financial, cultural, or logistical barriers. Therefore, governments and organizations should prioritize **investments in flexible, community-based educational programs**, digital learning tools, and peer-led knowledge-sharing

platforms. These initiatives can serve as **scalable and sustainable alternatives** to conventional schooling, enabling women to develop relevant skills, improve their socio-economic conditions, and become agents of change within their communities.

6. Conclusion

This study has highlighted the **transformative impact of informal learning** on women's empowerment, particularly in environments where access to formal education is limited or absent. The findings demonstrate that informal education—whether through peer networks, mentorship, community workshops, or digital platforms—plays a vital role in enhancing women's **skills, self-confidence, and social agency**. These alternative learning pathways equip women with the tools to navigate social, economic, and cultural challenges, often leading to greater participation in decision-making at both household and community levels.

Importantly, the study also emphasizes that informal learning is **not a substitute for formal education**, but rather a **complementary force** that can fill existing gaps and expand access to lifelong learning. When harnessed effectively, informal education can drive meaningful progress toward **gender equality and inclusive development**.

However, to fully unlock the potential of informal learning, there is a need for **stronger policy support and institutional recognition**. Governments, NGOs, and educational planners should work collaboratively to integrate informal learning into national frameworks—through flexible accreditation models, local learning hubs, and inclusive digital platforms. By acknowledging and supporting these community-rooted learning systems, we can ensure that women, particularly from marginalized backgrounds, are not left behind in the global pursuit of empowerment and equality.

Future research should explore how these models can be scaled, sustained, and made more inclusive across diverse socio-economic settings, with a focus on long-term outcomes and intergenerational impact.

References

1. Choudhury, S., & Singh, A. (2022). *Role of Informal Learning in Enhancing Women's Entrepreneurial Skills*. **Journal of Workplace Learning**, 34(5), 320–335.
2. Kabeer, N. (2019). *Gender, Informal Education, and Empowerment in Developing Contexts*. **Gender & Development**, 27(3), 459–474.
3. Kumar, R., & Sharma, P. (2020). *Informal Learning Practices Among Rural Women: Impacts on Empowerment and Livelihoods*. **International Journal of Educational Development**, 76, 102–112.
4. Das, S., & Roy, M. (2021). *Community-Based Learning and Women's Participation in Informal Education Programs*. **Education, Citizenship and Social Justice**, 16(2), 145–162.
5. Sen, T., & Banerjee, A. (2018). *Empowering Women Through Non-Formal Learning Initiatives in India*. **Asian Journal of Women's Studies**, 24(4), 411–428.
6. Patel, R., & Joshi, K. (2023). *Digital Informal Learning and Women Empowerment in Urban India*. **International Journal of Lifelong Education**, 42(1), 88–104.
7. Ahmad, F., & Lee, J. (2021). *Informal Learning Networks and Gender Equality in Developing Countries*. **Learning, Culture and Social Interaction**, 28, 100451.
8. Verma, S., & Nair, R. (2022). *Peer Learning and Skills Development for Women: Informal Pathways to Empowerment*. **Journal of Education and Work**, 35(3), 249–263.