

Non-Governmental Organizations' approaches to women's empowerment amid the COVID-19 Pandemic: Towards decolonizing development praxis in northern Ghana.

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Abstract

This article examines local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) approaches to women's empowerment amid crisis and the implications for decolonizing women's empowerment praxis. The article draws on lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic and decolonial critique of development praxis to analyse LNGOs approach to women's empowerment. The study relied on snowballing to select twenty-six LNGOs operating in northern Ghana for in-depth interviews. Our study found that LNGOs deploy local and international frameworks on women's rights and combine these with indigenous knowledge principles and economic empowerment. Yet there are tensions between negotiating culturally appropriate approaches and meeting the interests of philanthro-capitalist donor agencies. The LNGOs are dependent on Western donors for financial resources and have become more vulnerable due to Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath as funding for women's empowerment work continues to dwindle. LNGOs have modified their interventions to address specific needs of beneficiaries arising from the consequences of the crises. This study enriches understandings of the specific vulnerabilities of LNGOs in northern Ghana, resource-scarce and semi-arid settings across the global South. For women's empowerment to achieve meaningful results, especially during and after crisis, activism needs to be centred on indigenous knowledge. This is central to building the resilience of LNGOs and women beneficiaries to effectively position themselves to absorb the shocks that attend crisis and to cope more effectively with it.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, decolonizing women's empowerment praxis, LNGOs, indigenous knowledge, northern Ghana

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1. Introduction

What are the philosophies, theories, and practices that underpin local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs) perspectives on women's empowerment? What can be learned from their approaches and the gains made, if any, for empowering women across similar resource-scarce and patriarchal settings? What strategies do LNGOs deploy in addressing gendered vulnerabilities and poverty occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath? What are the implications of LNGOs approaches to performing development during crisis time for decolonizing women's empowerment praxis? Answers to these questions are important in understanding LNGOs approaches to and strategies for empowering women during period of crisis and post-crisis era and the implications for decolonizing development praxis in the postcolonial context of northern Ghana. Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic on the global scene in 2019, it has had a particularly devastating impact on the livelihoods, and psychosocial lives of vulnerable segments of populations, including women and girls (Branicki, 2020; UN, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; World Bank, 2020; WHO, 2020). In 2020, the United Nations Development Program ([UNDP]) observed that 'The Covid-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis: it is affecting societies and economies at their core.' The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and poverty in various settings across the globe and the devastation fuelled by the pandemic has further complicated the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. Indeed, the UN (2021a: 12) rightly observes that 'the Sustainable Development Goals have been thrown even further off track'. The pandemic has impacted differently positioned people—aged, people with disability, ethnic and racial minorities, indigent—disparately and existing inequalities have intensified, particularly in poor regions and among vulnerable populations who are already deprived in many respects (Rieger et al., 2022; UN, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

Women's normative role as caregivers as well as their dominance in the informal sectors means that they are more prone to social and economic vulnerabilities in times of crisis, including the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath (Harman, 2016; Wenham, Smith, & Morgan, 2020; de Paz et al., 2020; United Nations [UN], 2020; UNDP, 2020). For example, it is estimated that domestic violence against women has increased across the global South and North during the period of Covid-19 (Branicki, 2020; UN, 2020). Furthermore, women, the majority of whom are concentrated in low-income, unstable employment, have been among

the hardest hit in terms of loss of livelihoods and income-generating avenues, especially in countries with poor safety nets (UN, 2020). The UN (2020: 2) reported that ‘the impacts of Covid-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex’. Additionally, women’s economic vulnerability is further complicated by the fact that most of them tend to engage in insecure and low-paying work (see Branicki, 2020; de Paz et al., 2020). The Covid-19 has deepened systemic inequalities as women are potentially excluded from an already shrinking job market and/or experience stalled career progression. For most women who were already experiencing poverty and other forms of vulnerabilities, particularly in resource-poor settings, Covid-19 and its aftermath have compounded fragile livelihoods and life-enhancing opportunities. For instance, between 2020 and 2021, due to lock down and school closure, a number of girls of school going age became pregnant in northern Ghana according to local media reports.

Despite what seems to be a threat to global socio-economic and health sustainability, Covid-19 and its aftermath offer important opportunities to reflect on the possibility of addressing women’s vulnerabilities intersected by multiple forces. For scholars such as Gilligan (1993: 109), crisis offers prospects to ‘return to a missed opportunity for growth’. The crisis and recovery processes afford both scholars and development practitioners an opportunity to critically reconsider the very theoretical assumptions and principles that underpin women’s empowerment theory and practice. As debates on decolonizing imperialist and capitalist-oriented development interventions have become even more urgent now than ever before (see Ampofo & Arnfred, 2006; Bawa, 2016; Oyewumi, 1997; Tamale, 2020), a critical engagement with Covid-19 and the lessons to emerge from it may offer useful prospects in interrogating how and why the global South as a geopolitical configuration has become the focus of Western imperialist ‘philanthropic’ gaze. In view of the growing need to decolonize development praxis, Tamale (2020) has called on African feminists to explore indigenous mechanisms for liberating African women’s thoughts and the practice of development from their colonial antecedents. The currency of reclaiming African indigenous mechanisms for gender empowerment and to articulate men and women’s everyday struggles in indigenous and culturally appropriate ways is imperative to liberate women’s empowerment interventions from imperialist histories (see Sachs, 1992).

In a gender inequitable society, where greater power (materially and socially), dominance, and authority tend to be vested in men, women’s ability to navigate gendered vulnerabilities

perpetrated by Covid-19 and crisis in general is likely to be constrained. Against this backdrop, the current study is an attempt to explore and understand the ways in which LNGOs execute development interventions at the time of the Covid-19 crisis and the post-crisis era and what this may mean for imagining decolonial development praxis. Among other things, our aim is to explore the extent to which context-specific dynamics, cultural norms, and marginalized women's voices and interests are taken into account in framing strategies; and how effective these approaches are in empowering and building resilience during crisis. This endeavour is imperative if we consider that LNGOs working in northern Ghana, and indeed across Sub-Saharan Africa, are powerfully influenced by Western dominant neoliberal and feminist scholarship and perspectives, which on occasion are removed from the contextual realities of the subjects of development interventions (Bedigen et al., 2020; Tamale, 2020; Zakiya, 2014). Indigenous knowledge systems, beliefs, norms, and values offer enormous potentials inasmuch as they sculpt the subjectivities of the beneficiaries of neoliberal and neo-comprador empowerment interventions (Zakiya, 2014). For the purposes of this article, we understand indigenous knowledge to mean local people's systems of know-how that emerge from their belief systems, cosmovisions, customs, values, and norms (Millar, 2014; Zakiya, 2014). Foregrounding development praxis in indigenous knowledge offers useful potential to adapt development practices that meet local people's aspirations and promotes locally informed ways of building resilience during crisis and its aftermath.

These insights are likely to be useful in informing policy formulation and advocacy during period of crisis since there is no such literature in this context. This research thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the nature of vulnerability of women as well as LNGOs approaches to women's empowerment during crisis. The study also makes a novel contribution to decolonising development praxis in the context of northern Ghana. Specifically, we explored ways to anchor empowerment practices at moments of crisis on indigenous perspectives, beliefs and value systems all in the service of effectively empowering women to build resilience to crisis across the study area and similar resource-scarce and patriarchal settings. Our findings also offer useful lessons for decolonizing women's empowerment practice and discourse by highlighting how to centre development agenda and practice on the 'marginalized' and 'oppressed' victims of liberation, thereby projecting and amplifying indigenous women's voices at crisis time (Langdon, 2013; Tucker, 1999). Finally, this study contributes

significantly to the burgeoning literature on Covid-19 in general, and specifically to the impact on women's empowerment in a developing context.

This study, as a first level of analysis, surveyed the LNGOs operating in the area of economic, social and political empowerment of women and girls and poverty reduction in the Upper West, Upper East and Northern Regions, all located in northern Ghana. This task was geared at creating an understanding of their approaches to women's empowerment and what those approaches may mean for decolonizing development praxis. The task was also aimed at assessing the extent to which these organizations incorporate context-specific notions of women's empowerment and consider marginalized women's aspirations and perspectives as well as give them voices within the background of predominantly western-centric donor ideals, conditionalities, conceptions of 'empowerment' and 'development' (Ampofo & Signe, 2006; Esteva, 1992; Escobar, 1998, 2009; Moyo, 2010; Tucker, 1999; Villalba, 2013). At a second level, the study critically examined the ways in which LNGOs perform women's empowerment during the Covid-19 crisis and the extent to which they incorporate context-specific conceptions and ideas on empowerment. This endeavour contributes immensely towards a deeper understanding of empowerment praxis in these patriarchal northern Ghanaian settings and the subtleties involved in negotiating donor conditionalities and local knowledge systems. The study is informed by postcolonial feminists' critique of Western dominant perspectives of development and women's empowerment discourses as well as discourses on crisis.

The rest of the article proceeds with engaging first the outbreak and responses to Covid-19 in Ghana. This is followed by postcolonial feminist discourses and critique of Western dominant perspectives on women's empowerment as these debates influence development praxis across the global South. In the next section we draw on crisis management theory to discuss the strategies deployed in managing crisis. Furthermore, we present the research context and the methodology adopted in the data collection and analysis. This is followed by presentation and discussion of the results. Subsequently, we propose a framework for decolonising women's empowerment theory and practice based on our research findings before we turn our attention to the conclusions, where we reflect on the implications of our findings for decolonising women's empowerment praxis.

2. Outbreak, Impact, and responses to Covid-19 in Ghana

The first case of the novel Covid-19 in Ghana was recorded on 12 March 2020, a day after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. By 30 March 2020, partial lockdown measures were instituted by the government to contain the spread in the country. By 26 July 2021, there were 101,170 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and 821 Covid-19 related deaths in Ghana (Afriyie et al., 2020).¹ By 8 July 2022, the country had recorded total cases of 166816 and 1453 deaths (Worldometer, 2022). Since the discovery of the pandemic in Ghana, it has had far-reaching consequences on Ghanaians, particularly for those in the informal sector. The informal sector has been characterized by highly erratic livelihood activities (Gyasi, 2020). In terms of geographical distribution, the adverse consequences have been greatest in the cities and urban areas in southern Ghana, where the Covid-19 cases have been high (Asante & Mills, 2020). Nonetheless, communities in northern Ghana have registered their own share of the cases and the adverse effects, including loss of jobs, abysmal poverty, increased vulnerabilities, and deaths.² In July 2021 the Northern Region recorded a total of 1672, the Upper East Region 1324 and the Upper West Region, 500 active cases (Ghana Health Service, 2021). Compared with dominant cities in southern Ghana, the spread of the pandemic has been relatively minimal in the study regions. Needless to say that lack of effective monitoring mechanisms, late reporting to health facilities, and under reporting of the Covid-19 cases mean that these figures may not truly represent the actual Covid-19 situation in the study regions and across Ghana.

Northern Ghana broadly has been historically and politically marginalized and disadvantaged due to colonial antecedents—colonial policies intentionally delayed the introduction of Western-style education and development (Thomas, 1974). The Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the level of deprivation in the study areas. As a result of the pandemic, residents of these regions have experienced loss of income, livelihoods, financial stress, and heightened food insecurity. This has been partly occasioned by a reduction in migration and mobility to urban centres in the southern part of Ghana, which hitherto constituted a huge source of income and livelihood for residents of the study areas (Akurugu, 2021).³ Even though Ghana has secured the Covid-19 vaccines, it is estimated that only 1.3%

1 https://www.ghanahealthservice.org/covid19/downloads/covid_19_first_confirmed_GH.pdf

2 <https://covid19.who.int/region/afro/country/gh>

3 <http://ebrary.ifpri.org/utills/getfile/collection/p15738coll2/id/134446/filename/134657.pdf>

of the Ghanaian citizenry is vaccinated against the Covid-19 virus.⁴ The negative consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic have been similarly felt by the LNGOs front. As we turn our attention to shortly, our study shows that a number of LNGOs across the study regions folded up as a result of further dwindling of funding occasioned by the onset of the Covid-19 crisis.

3. Postcolonial feminists' perspectives on women's empowerment

Decolonial and postcolonial feminist discourses on development and women's empowerment praxis in the global South have drawn attention to the dominance of Western-oriented beliefs, knowledge, and assumptions that underpin much of development interventions in these settings (Bawa, 2016; Easterly, 2006; Moyo, 2009; Gudynas, 2011; Sachs, 1992; Zakiya, 2014). Indeed, Bawa (2016: 1-2) points out that, 'discourses of development are riddled with false binary juxtapositions of "developed" Western and "developing/underdeveloped" non-Western models of progress.' And these crude juxtapositions are not without consequences. Conceptions of women's empowerment are often framed within a narrow framework that elides socio-cultural mechanisms for women's empowerment. Similar to the argument of Bawa, Callaghan et al. (2015: 508) assert that, most development interventions tend to impose 'neoliberal constructs of gender equality that neglect a sufficient engagement with the complexity and specificity of particular countries and regions'. By decontextualizing development interventions, there is greater risk of inadvertently disempowering the target beneficiaries as indigenous cultural norms and values are not attended to (Batliwala, 1997). At the time of crisis when vulnerable people's livelihoods become even more precarious than before, the need to anchor empowerment practices on indigenous cultures, systems and practices is more imperative.

Over the years, women's empowerment has been perceived as the impetus for poverty reduction, the elimination of violence against women and the means to achieving equity in development and gender equality (Akurugu et al., 2021; Bawa, 2016; Batliwala, 1994, 2007; Rowlands, 1997). Empowerment is often seen as the way out of gendered oppression and the

4 https://www.google.com/search?sxsrf=ALeKk03oREr7asaTzKCKGoQ1XnxiHMIeGA:1627336870812&q=co-vid+vaccine+statistics&si=AHBsk9v6OXQPqCNzgJbkX9hOL9kRxsF3WxxLT43GRlgww_bisAW_3lp8H-g42JyB35RtZgP3S_0rUtqxYeR534pLlxUgGlzDk33x1dMTIyMd25OGkUGr01HrFeV9M3D4vZHMTiXGH45f_sX_GHVK4CQD2Cfo9ca30qgHmFbE8_9cKxCG3jCYVUOBGky1A8dXoV_kw7t3ZVm3&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjN-_Sg3oHyAhWIecAKHeA_A5EQzrYHegUICxCFag&biw=1280&bih=664

subordination of women. Nonetheless, empowerment has also become a buzzword that tends to serve dominant neoliberal and neo-comprador institutions' interests and agendas (Batliwala, 2007; Bawa, 2016; Molyneux, 1985). In Batliwala's (1994: 130) view, empowerment may be understood as 'The process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power'. This view presupposes the prevalence of unequal power relations that require transformation as well as inequitable distribution of access and control of power. Thus, the task of empowerment, as a discourse and practice, is to work toward addressing these injustices so as to enhance equality of access to and control over power and its sources.

To be able to achieve these desirable outcomes, we argue that empowerment praxis needs to incorporate the lived experiences of the 'oppressed' victims, of their endeavors into the design and implementation of development interventions. Furthermore, for Alsop and Heinsohn (2005: 4), empowerment refers to 'a person's capacity to make effective choices; that is, as the capacity to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes'. Kabeer (2005: 15) conceptualizes empowerment as 'the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability'. This perspective suggests a state of disempowerment, with limited access to power, to a state of empowerment, where there are options. Empowerment then is a means to as well as an end in itself and key to this is the agency of the actors involved in the process. The perspectives under consideration here highlight the importance of structural issues and transforming these are critical to empowering women effectively in the male-centric settings of northern Ghana. Yet, without foregrounding the philosophies and practices of women's empowerment on contextual values, beliefs, and norms, LNGOs operating in this, and similar contexts are unlikely to achieve meaningful results beyond instrumentalism (Akurugu et al. 2021). The need to anchor empowerment praxis on local beliefs and ideas is even more important at crisis moments, including during and after the Covid-19 period, given that vulnerabilities surge (Barbier & Burgess, 2020). Consequently, concerted efforts are required from stakeholders. Empowerment endeavours do not preclude external stimuli; instead, they require these to stimulate local systems and structures; to improve local capacity and to enhance local talents, which otherwise may remain underexplored.

Despite formal decolonization with the end of formal colonialism, subjects of development

interventions, including women's empowerment endeavor are frequently at the mercy of neoliberal domination (Ampofo & Arnfred, 2006; Sachs, 1992; Tamale, 2020). Western imperialism, reflected in neo-colonial structures of domination and exploitation continue to exercise economic, political, and cultural control over the formally colonized subjects (Mignolo, 2011; Tamale, 2020). We suggest that decolonization is imperative to building the resilience of LNGOs and the beneficiaries of women's empowerment endeavors to overcome deprivation and vulnerability during crisis. In considering decolonizing empowerment praxis during crisis, it is important to underscore that the external agencies' strategies need to be centred on indigenous knowledge, value systems and livelihood sources. This centring on norms and local knowledge-based systems is imperative if the views and experiences of historically marginalized segments such as women in the patriarchal settings of the study are to count and if women's empowerment in crisis is to achieve meaningful results (Zakiya, 2014). These views resonate with postcolonial perspectives on this subject matter (Ampofo & Arnfred, 2006; Esteva 1992, Sachs, 1992; Tamale, 2020). For instance, quoting Stavenhagen, Esteva (1992: 7) writes: 'we need to "look within" and "search for one's own culture" instead of using borrowed and foreign views'. Against this background, we would suggest that empowerment praxis should be based on indigenous ways of knowing, being and acting.

4. Crisis Management

Crisis moments can be erratic and unavoidable, and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is no exception (Perrow, 1984). According to Mitroff et al. (1987: 283), crisis refers to 'disasters precipitated by people, organizational structures, economics, and/or technology that cause extensive damage to human life and natural and social environments. They inevitably debilitate both the financial structure and the reputation of a large organization'. The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted businesses, livelihoods systems and social relations and in poor settings such as the study areas, both LNGOs and beneficiary women have been much affected by its consequences (UN, 2021a; WHO, 2020b).

Crisis management involves preparedness for mitigation, containment or lessening the impact of an unforeseen eventuality should it occur as well as learning from it to build resilience (see Branicki, 2020). Feminists' discourses on crisis have drawn attention to the risk of overlooking women's peculiar needs and interests during period of crisis (Branicki, 2020; Otto, 2011). Indeed, Otto (2011) has argued that 'feminism is pushed "off the map" in a crisis'.

However, Branicki notes that feminist crisis management recognizes crisis ‘as multiple and contextualized, as enduring and overlapping phenomena that are enmeshed and embedded within each other to a significant extent’ (2020: 9). Women’s vulnerabilities ascend in crisis and feminist crisis management emphasises the importance of identifying opportunities for engendering social transformation in crisis (Branicki, 2020). The Covid-19 outbreak offers enormous opportunities to engender this social transformation as we turn to shortly. Whereas in their operations the LNGOs may not be said to elide women’s empowerment endeavours, the dwindling, as well as shift in focus, of funding agencies to the LNGOs and the effects of these reverberate with Otto’s assertion. Our analysis will show that none of the LNGOs was prepared for crisis of the magnitude unleashed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the majority of the LNGOs did not have a crisis management scheme in place and this further worsened their already vulnerable statuses. The Covid-19 pandemic thus presents with prospects to engender change through effective crisis management (see Branicki, 2020).

5. The research context

Northern Ghana is located within a semi-arid, harsh climatic zone with high temperatures. Subsistence, hoe-based and rain-fed agricultural activities are the main sources of livelihood for most residents of northern Ghana. As a result of erratic rainfall pattern and the reliance on harmful agricultural practices, livelihood sources are severely threatened. Consequently, poverty and hunger are endemic, and deprivation is commonplace (Ghana National Household Register [GNHR], 2020; GSS, 2014, 2018). As would be expected, the pervasiveness of deprivation is further exacerbated during crisis, including the Covid-19 pandemic.

A pernicious combination of endemic poverty, male dominance, and ineffective social welfare schemes further complicate (differently positioned) women’s experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly those engaged in the informal sector (Asante & Mills, 2020). This situation is more so for inhabitants of the settlements in northern Ghana, an area that has been historically marginalized and where extreme poverty is highest. For instance, according to the Ghana Statistical Service (2018), northern Ghana accounts for 67% of the incidence of extreme poverty. Normatively, in northern Ghana, women scarcely have control over productive resources and decision-making power due to the patrilineal system of inheritance and the virilocal residential pattern (Author, 2020). Within the context of these constraints, the

advent of the Covid-19 pandemic has further worsened an already precarious situation, namely, endemic poverty and deprivation.

6. Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was deployed to gather and analyse the data. Primary data were collected using a two-stage approach. The first stage of data collection attempted to survey all LNGOs working on advancing women’s rights and empowerment in northern Ghana. Our justification for focusing on this category of organization was to ensure that our sample frame provided the right context for examining the strategies LNGO deploy in women’s empowerment during the Covid-19 pandemic and the implications for decolonizing women’s empowerment praxis. This proved quite challenging as there is no database containing such information. Furthermore, most of the LNGOs tend to be only active when they secure funding. We turned our attention to the Department of the Gender, Children and Social Protection in one of the three study regions. With the support of the Department, we were able to enlist some of the vibrant LNGOs and once we contacted them, they were very useful in helping us identify other LNGOs through snowballing. Within the constraints presented by a surge in the figures of Covid-19 infection cases, we contacted 30 LNGOs and were successful in carrying out 26 semi-structured interviews with their respective representatives.⁵⁶ Table 1 contains details of the LNGOs that participated in the interviews.

Table 1: Details of participating LNGOs in Northern Ghana

Responding LNGO	Regional location of organization	Gender of respondent	Years of service	Focus of Organisation
LNGO1	Upper West Region	Female	11	Advocacy, sanitation, education, micro-credit
LNGO2	Upper East Region	Female	18	Income generation, micro credit, vocational training, HIV/AIDS campaigns, education, human rights project

5 Informed consent was obtained from the research participants and in line with ethical practices, all names of respondents and organizations have been omitted.

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LNGO3	Upper Region	West	Male	5	Promoting quality delivery of basic social services such as education, health, women empowerment, sustainable livelihoods, guarding the rights of women and children in deprived communities
LNGO4	Upper Region	West	Male	15	Advocacy on gender-based violence, child marriage teen pregnancy, street children
LNGO5	Upper Region	West	Male	28	Advocacy on rights and ending violence against women, targeting women with Covid -19 education interventions
LNGO6	Upper Region	West	Male	10	Advocacy on gender equality and social inclusion, accountability and good governance, women's participation in governance, ending child marriage
LNGO7	Upper Region	West	Male	7	Advocacy on health, good governance, social accountability, rights of marginalized and vulnerable in society, proper sanitation and hygiene, and natural resource conservation
LNGO8	Northern Region		Male	9	Micro-credit, agro-based interventions, research and advocacy, farmers innovation, business incubation
LNGO9	Northern Region		Female	13	Safety and dignity of women accused of witchcraft, promoting women's mental health in Ghana, promoting opportunity for women's empowerment and rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights
LNGO10	Northern Region		Female	8	Health care access, human rights protection and civil liberties, microfinance, social justice education
LNGO11	Upper Region	East	Male	10	Advocacy on sexual and reproductive health, empowering women to end sexual and gender-based violence, economic empowerment, legal awareness
LNGO12	Upper Region	West	Female	9	Social Justice, gender equality, women's economic empowerment and poverty eradication
LNGO13	Upper Region	East	Male	5	Advocacy on women empowerment, promoting access to education, economic development, food security and resilience, good governance
LNGO14	Upper Region	East	Female	14	Advocacy on climate change and resilience Educate farmers on climate resilient practices, support women with micro-credit Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Saving with Education (SWE) activities
LNGO15	Upper Region	West	Male	13	Promote people's rights to food and livelihoods, healthy living, quality basic education, equal socio-economic opportunities Promote gender equity and good governance
LNGOP16	Upper Region	East	Male	10	Advocacy in health, good governance, social accountability, advocating rights of

				marginalised in society, sanitation and hygiene, natural resource conservation
LNGO17	Northern Region	Female	8	Education, livelihood empowerment, sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender and governance, micro-credit
LNGO18	Upper East Region	Male	15	Advocacy to influence formulation and /or implementation of pro-poor policy initiatives Community mobilization, sensitization, capacity building
LNGO19	Upper West Region	Male	14	Advocacy on access to education, gender sensitivity and mainstreaming, children's rights, people living with disability, HIV/AIDS and access to Primary Health Care
LNGO20	Northern Region	Male	8	Economic intervention, empowering women via training in value addition, business management, agriculture activities for food security at the home.
LNGO21	Upper West Region	Male	15	Advocacy, promoting agro-ecology methodologies, economic empowerment, building indigenous institutions, food sovereignty
LNGO22	Upper East Region	Female	9	Advocacy on gender equality and rights of women and girls, promoting and maintaining self-help spirit among women and men, livelihood activities and building the capacities of members, promoting socio-cultural values and systems for peaceful co-existence
LNGO23	Upper East Region	Male	5	Enhance economic development, food security and resilience. Promote health education, sanitation and hygiene, good governance and advocacy in rural and peri-urban communities and districts
LNGO24	Upper East Region	Female	10	Advocacy on gender equality, accountability and good governance; women's participation in governance, micro-credit, agro-based interventions, Research and advocacy, farmers innovation, business incubation
LNGO25	Northern Region	Male	8	Advocacy in health, access to education for children, women's empowerment and livelihood development
LNGO26	Northern Region	Female	10	Advocacy on women empowerment, protection of women and young girls against violence promote gender equality at all levels in the Northern Region

As a starting point, we thoroughly reviewed the LNGOs' mission statements, goals and objectives as well as project documents to gain an in-depth understanding of their focus and approach to women's empowerment. Following this process and based on insights gained, programme officers and executive directors of the selected LNGOs were contacted for in-depth

interviews. For the participants located in the Upper West Region, face-to-face interviews were conducted, paying attention to the Covid-19 safety protocols. The research participants located in the Northern and Upper East Regions were interviewed via mobile phones. This approach aligns with Cooper and Schindler's (2014) perspective that semi-structured and in-depth interviews with respondents are helpful in providing novel insights. As the participants were assured of full anonymity, details such as the actual names of the organizations, respondents and their positions are excluded. This is in line with the pre-designed interview protocols and to ensure confidentiality for all participants in the interviews conducted. The interview protocols also ensured reliability in the data collection process through the piloting of the initial interview instrument with other academics and management of some LNGOs. This ensured clarity in the questions before the actual data collection phase. As we grapple with the insidious dominance of neoliberal and philanthro-capitalist institutions in the study areas and across Ghana, we acknowledge our privileged positionalities as beneficiaries of Western style education in the global North (Dery & Bawa, 2019). We also acknowledge our identities as a female and two male academy-based scholars (with one of the males based in United Kingdom) and our ethnic identities as a Frafra woman and two Dagaaba men, all from northern Ghana. Consequently, we write from a vantage point; of being cultural insiders who grew up in northern Ghana. Also, as critical gender and decolonial scholars, our efforts seek to contribute towards liberating development praxis in the context of this study from American- and Euro-centrism as well as neoliberal capitalism.

6.1 Data Analysis

At the end of the data collection, all the authors listened to the recorded interviews. After transcribing the interviews which were conducted in English by the first author, each author read all the interview transcripts to gain a deeper understanding of the LNGOs perspectives and approaches to women's empowerment. An in-depth analysis of the approaches to women's empowerment was conducted, paying attention to the modifications at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Each author drew out the emerging themes, paying particular attention to the recurrent ones (see Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The authors also compared notes in order to harmonize and synthesize the themes that each writer identified. This process afforded us an opportunity to

further enrich our understanding of the data and to draw out the emerging themes (Saunders et al., 2009). When the central themes were becoming apparent, we began to tease them out, grouping similar themes, taking note of how they relate to each other. In order to form overarching themes that constituted the basis of analysis in the ensuing sections, we drew similar indexes together. This was done using template analysis (TA) to thematically analyse the interview data. Template analysis is a form of thematic analysis for organising and analysing qualitative research. It entails developing a template for coding. The coding template summarises recurrent perspectives or ideas and patterns identified from the data set into relevant themes and in a way that is meaningful and highlight the relationship between the various themes (King 2012; Brooks & King, 2014). Template analysis permits considerable flexibility in generating codes from mainly interviews by developing and utilising a coding template (King 2012; Brooks & King, 2014). In this study, first of all, all the authors read the transcripts several times to immerse themselves in the participants' narratives and following this, they each generated codes independently. A coding template was developed and the codes were organised into meaningful and useful themes and sub-themes, paying particular attention to the recurrent patterns considered to be relevant to the research questions (Brooks & King, 2014). The themes generated included women's empowerment, donor interferences, dwindling funding, socio-cultural, beliefs, covid-19. After the coding the transcripts were analysed drawing on a thematic analysis framework. This approach enabled us to gain a deeper understanding of the LNGOs' conceptions and practices of women's empowerment, especially at the time of Covid-19. At the presentation of results and discussion stage, to which we turn shortly, the main themes and the data associated with them were the basis for structuring.

7. Results and discussion

In this section we report the research findings on the LNGOs approaches to and strategies for carrying out interventions on women's empowerment, and the modifications at the time of the Covid-19 crisis in recognition that vulnerability, deprivation and violence against women have soared as a result of the pandemic (Branicki, 2020; WHO, 2020b). We also discuss the challenges to performing women's empowerment in the patriarchal and male-dominant settings of the study and the implications for decolonizing women's empowerment practices. We start with philosophy, theory and practice that underpin women's empowerment in the study areas.

7.1. Philosophy, theory and practice of women's empowerment: LNGOs Perspectives

The assumptions that shape women's empowerment work, according to the research participants, span a range of practical, not so abstract to more theoretical issues. Central to all the views expressed by our respondents is the importance of transforming dominant socio-cultural beliefs that oppress women. For a chief executive officer (CEO) in the Upper West Region (UWR), women's empowerment requires a transformation of the mind-set as their subordination is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and assumptions on women and men. He explained further:

Empowerment must start from the mind; how do we change that whole long-standing belief that women should not or cannot have power and that it has to be only the man at the centre of everything? My perspective is that if we really want to look at more sustainable empowerment interventions, we have to focus on changing the perceptions of women and men that see women as inferior; this is very critical. Once this mind-set is changed, we can focus on economic empowerment through skills development. Without working on the mind-set, we are unlikely to achieve sustainable development.

The perspectives above resonate with women's empowerment discourses that underscore the need to address both strategic interests and practical needs to effectively empower women (Batliwala, 1994, 1997; Kabeer, 2005). Other conceptions that target the psyche included that of a CEO of an advocacy-based LNGO located in the Northern Region. She explained:

At my organization, we see women's empowerment to mean being able to speak up on issues that concern women. It is about having the voice to speak and being listened to. For me, a woman is considered to be empowered when her rights are respected. In our activities, we focus on these tenets as part of the empowerment process.

In her reflections expressed, this participant conceptualizes empowerment as a process that facilitates women's access to dignity, safety, human rights, and decent living. To her and many other participants, women's empowerment should be pursued as a holistic process whereby issues that concern women are brought to the forefront. Participants also spoke extensively on the need to dismantle intersecting inequalities that disadvantage women. Another CEO in the UWR explains:

If we take an instrumentalist approach to women's empowerment and we implement it effectively, women will be better-off. In the dry season, we support women to engage in additional source of livelihood. We train them on how to do vegetable gardening.

This gives women some income and also enhances their nutritional status. Women no longer depend on their husbands for everything. One of the women beneficiaries told me that her husband listens to her opinion because she brings some income to the table. This is the empowerment we pursue at my organization. We want both men and women to be happy.

Our interaction with representatives of LNGOs revealed that women's empowerment is central to their politics, activism, philosophy, theory, and practice. While this was strongly articulated throughout the interviews, most LNGOs did not have a clear emphasis on mainstreaming gender in their mission, vision, aims and objectives. LNGOs work across multiple thematic areas. The first group of LNGOs pays attention to advocacy on equity in health access, political representation and participation and accountable governance, campaign on girls' education and undoing dangerous socio-cultural practices that normalize violence against women. In all, eight of the LNGOs we interviewed target these structural issues. The second category of LNGOs, numbering eighteen, focuses on interventions that address practical gender needs, including the provision of micro-credit facilities and agro-processing facilities to women and combine these with elements of the previous cohort—attending to structural issues — in their activism. This is in recognition of the importance of attending to both the practical gender needs and the strategic gender interests in the resource-scarce and male-dominant settings of northern Ghana (Akurugu et al, 2021). In terms of geographical distribution, ten of the LNGOs are based in the Upper West Region, nine in Upper East Region and seven in Northern Region.

Indeed, most of the participants strongly articulated the relevance of paying attention to the practical needs as a means to achieving the structural components. Within the context of this study where resources are scarce and poverty levels are unacceptably high, it is significant to recognize that these interventions are extremely important as they extend lifelines to vulnerable households. Yet, the emphasis on the operational needs is problematic given that on their own they do not always translate into transforming power structures and gendered inequalities or giving voices to women (Kabeer, 2005). An emphasis on the livelihood empowerment was also the case for organizations that concentrate on advocacy and this is attributable to the pervasiveness of extreme deprivation in the context of the study. Thus, the philosophy, theory and practice are strongly contingent upon the contextual factors and the dictates of the economic needs.

7.2. Women's empowerment: LNGOs approaches and strategies

Within the study areas, the challenges that women and girls come up against are numerous. Broadly, the challenges can be grouped under three interrelated categories. They are socio-cultural beliefs and rigidities that marginalize and dehumanize women and girls, preventing them from optimizing their full potentials. In these male-dominant settings, the women are expected to be subservient and to put up with male spousal violence, without challenging the status quo (Author, 2021). A CEO in Northern Region (NR) explained: 'Over here, women are socialized from childhood to accept an inferior status and even in some of our programmes the women say "but how can we compare ourselves to the men?" But increasingly, many women have seen the unfairness in societal norms; especially the younger ones.' This view, which has been widespread in our study, reverberates with research on gendered power relations in northern Ghana (see, Akurugu, 2020, 2021).

Closely related to this marginalization of women are low participation of women in public life, limited access to productive resources and endemic poverty and vulnerability, lack of access to formal financial services and teenage pregnancy.⁷ The LNGOs we interviewed were careful in outlining their strategies for approaching women's empowerment and varied as these are, they were deemed to be successful in achieving the intended outcomes. According to the participants, to empower women effectively, they have had to adapt strategies based on the beneficiary women's values and aspirations, whilst at the same time remain respectful of the cultures that deeply structure their existence. The specific approaches that LNGOs deploy to perform women's empowerment include rights-based approaches combined with indigenous knowledge principles and culturally appropriate values (adapted by ten of the LNGOs). A CEO of an LNGO that focuses on advocacy in the Upper East Region (UER) elaborated on the approach to ending violence against women and dehumanizing socio-cultural practices. She explained that her organization's approach to advocacy is based on the national and international frameworks for negotiating women's rights such as the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, the Domestic Violence Act (ACT 732, 2007) and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. In order to adapt these legal frameworks to

⁷ See the African Women's report, (2009) for a detailed discussion on the socio-cultural challenges that serve as setbacks to the realization of gender equality in Africa.

the indigenous cultural norms, values and beliefs, they are combined with indigenous knowledge ideals. She explained further:

Our work combines what the women themselves complain about in terms of how it affects them as well as how those practices are related to the international and Ghanaian frameworks and whether they are dignifying ... there are so many things that I may see as dehumanizing but when the women are prioritizing their need, they might not be part.

This hybrid approach affords the LNGOs an opportunity to facilitate awareness creation as well as fashion out culturally relevant strategies for empowering women, thus eschewing charges of western-centrism often levelled against LNGOs working in the male-dominant settings of northern Ghana. Furthermore, the LNGOs revealed that they deploy approaches that are premised on male and opinion leaders' support for gender activism. Specifically, they target men, husbands, male heads of beneficiary households whose acceptance of the intervention is central to its success. A CEO in the UWR noted that: 'The activities vary a lot and we do a lot of sensitization programmes with not only the women but also with the [male] traditional leaders. We do a lot of targeting of influential men and religious and women leaders. We see them as key stakeholders in fostering gender equality.' This approach, which cuts across all the LNGOs under consideration, is in recognition that women's empowerment endeavours might not achieve productive results if the men, that is, husbands, heads of family and opinion leaders are not involved. Consequently, by bringing them into the interventions, the LNGOS nurture understanding and enlist their support for women's empowerment programmes. Consider the views of a CEO of a LNGO in UWR regarding their approach to women's empowerment:

We find ways of mainstreaming gender and generational equity by focusing on the experiences of differently positioned women, men, boys and girls on say poverty. And then we try to see how our interventions can be modelled to benefit both women and men.... We are guided by the philosophy that 'I am because we are'... much as we want to address the interests of the women, we are careful not to select or name the intervention 'a women's project'. Because we consider the role that the men will play to ensure that a project can be successful. If we take agroecology, for example, mostly the land tenure agreement vests land ownership with the men and the seeds are controlled by the men. Although our idea was to reach women, we started discussing issues of access to land and seeds with the men. Then we brought the women in and we

introduced the livestock programme which went directly to them. ... Even though we were targeting women, we engaged the broader communities to lay the foundation.

By invoking the ubuntu philosophy, 'I am because we are', the participant seeks to appeal to the notion of interdependence and relations with others (Tamale, 2020) which are important values in northern Ghana. This respondent highlights that once the women become financially empowered, they will be able to assist the men and his perspectives seem to be overburdening women in this cultural frame where the burden of care disproportionately rests on women. The key leitmotif that runs through all of the interviews is the need to enlist the support of men for women's empowerment. However, this also has the potential to rub the women of the proceeds of the interventions in the male-centric settings of the study, although a director of LNGO in NR disagrees. Instead, this approach can nurture the independence of the women, he argues:

It offers the women some space to be independent and to look more responsible. Yes, the tendencies for the men to take over the projects are there but that is why the foundational work and the community entry processes are very important. With the right engagement you are likely to reduce the risk of the men taking over the proceeds.

In theory, all the research participants alluded to this notion of the importance of anchoring the empowerment interventions on the women's lived experiences and indigenous cultural values and there are great lessons for decolonizing women's empowerment praxis. However, we return to the tensions between meeting donor conditionalities and negotiating indigenous values and norms soon. Nonetheless, there are important lessons for decolonizing women's empowerment discourses and for eschewing femo-centrism which is a common critique of feminist activism in male-centric settings. The LNGOs under consideration adapt varied strategies in performing women's empowerment.

7.3. Performing women's empowerment during the Covid-19 crisis: Strategies and Lessons

The LNGOs revealed that since the outbreak of the Covid-19, they have had to modify their approaches in terms of social interactions and in line with the WHO protocols for the

prevention of the spread of the Covid-19.⁸ Specifically, it became imperative to roll out activities towards ensuring the safety of the beneficiary communities. Some LNGOs reported that they purchased and supplied Veronica buckets⁹, hand sanitizers and nose masks to project beneficiaries. In some instances, these were the only items provided while other LNGOs went a step further to provide foodstuff and a waiver on loan repayment period and interest rate.¹⁰ Also, eight LNGOs carried out Covid-19 awareness and prevention activities through public address systems at selected marketplaces and via radio discussions.

In all, only five LNGOs reported that they have crises management strategies in place. For the rest of the LNGOs, although in the past they had to deal with disasters, the Covid-19 pandemic presented with a unique set of challenges not least because of its global character. This is quite unsettling given that the settings in northern Ghana are no strangers to crisis, and the most common ones are induced by flooding, fire outbreaks and food insecurity. Without planning for such crises, it becomes more challenging to mitigate them when they occur. The novel Covid-19 pandemic has thus further exposed the LNGOs' vulnerability to crisis. One respondent indicated that 'we were all caught pants down. The emergency crisis management package is topical in our management discussions now; around how we can sustain the organization especially as donors are beginning to consider dealing with Covid-19 related challenges in their own countries'. As expected, all the LNGOs that we interviewed indicated that they are now initiating steps towards creating crisis management packages and building resilience to effectively manage any future occurrences. It is unsurprising that faced with the harsh reality of Covid-19 crisis and unable to cope with its effects, many already vulnerable LNGOs have had to close down.

7.4. Bottlenecks: Dwindling donor funding

Diminishing donor funding in support of the activities of the LNGOs is a major setback to women's empowerment in general and in the Covid-19 crisis. According to our participants, there is general donor fatigue across the global South, and this is exacerbated by governmental

8 https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public?gclid=Cj0KCCQiA962BBhCzARIsAIPWEL37cFBtI4avddHlkt9M0tHETR1XK_mSXosJ0RTrzde10XuGLCqeQIYaAqckEALw_wcB

9 The Veronica bucket refers to a mechanism for encouraging regular hand washing and for promoting hygiene in general. It is made up of a water collecting receptacle fitted with a tap at the bottom for use where safe running water is lacking.

10 According to a male executive director of one LNGO, the interest rate for their micro-credit facility was reduced from 15% to 3% in recognition that women's burden and need for financial resources have increased and also that the Covid-19 pandemic has predisposed micro-businesses to shocks.

policies and rhetoric that suggest that Ghana is self-sufficient. Closely related to this is the attainment of Lower-Middle Income status by Ghana, which means that certain funding avenues are no longer available. Furthermore, there is lack of human and financial resources by the state institutions working in the area of women's empowerment. With reference to the Covid-19 pandemic, the research participants lamented over the way in which its outbreak has further exposed LNGOs to financial vulnerability. Actually, we were informed that a number of LNGOs have folded up as a result of decreasing/reprioritization of the funding agencies occasioned by the Covid-19 crisis. Indeed, a respondent in Wa who is a chief executive officer of his LNGO explained that:

'funding is a challenge and I can tell you there are many NGOs that have closed down because of Covid[-19]; because the funding space has shrank [laughs]. Yesterday I called a few friends [who operate LNGOs] to organize the number of NGOs in town [Wa] for us to have an interaction with an EU delegation. I mentioned this one [LNGO] and my friend said: "oh, they have closed oo"; I mentioned another one and another friend said: "oh, they have oo"..... I cannot count the number of LNGOs that have closed down as a result of lack of funding in this Covid[-19] times'.

The respondent, while experiencing financial stress amid the pandemic in his organization, was in shock to learn about the number of LNGOs that had yielded to financial difficulties due to Covid-19. Similarly, a programmes manager of an LNGO in Tamale, Northern Region explained that it was very difficult to recommend LNGOs that engage in women's empowerment work to the research team because a number of them had folded up as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, while we acknowledge that the dwindling donor funding precede the Covid-19 pandemic, the pandemic has further worsened the funding situation for the LNGOs, majority of which are already vulnerable due to lack of financial independence.

On the general lack of financial support, a CEO explained that funding focus changes on occasion. She explained:

There was a point when most funding organizations started putting more money in what we called the 'he for she' agenda. It means the money wasn't coming straight to the women's empowerment NGOs; instead, it was going through other organizations that were promoting the 'he for she' agenda. This and similar adjustments limit the amount of funding portfolio available for women's rights work.

In terms of interference and interests of western-led donor organizations, our respondents revealed that they tend to insist on setting the agenda for women's empowerment. Consider the opinion of a male CEO in UWR:

Unless you have financial independence there is no way you won't be exposed to donor interference. If you are funded by the Western donor agencies, why are they doing it? A lot of them do [fund] it because in the long-run it will contribute to support the growth of their economy in a way. We are aware of these interests and that is why we are very careful in selecting who we work with. We have seen very juicy advertisements but we will not waste our time to apply for those ones because at the end of the day we have a certain approach to work. So, we tend to look for the funding organizations that have goals closer to our aims and focus.

The view of the respondent above powerfully encapsulates the perspectives of all the other participants. The LNGOs that we interviewed claimed that donor interests that diverge from their own primary focus is a major stumbling block to the achievement of specific aims and objectives. According to a CEO in NR:

These days, LNGOs activities are suffering; we can hardly raise the funding as we used to. Even our own sustainability is under threat and we need to work on it seriously. If we have sustainable funding, when the disaster occurs, we are able to respond; to reach out to the most vulnerable. But once you are vulnerable yourself how do you intervene in people's situation?

Similarly, a programmes manager of a LNGO in UWR explained the nature of interference the organizations encounter:

It [donor interference] happens all the time. For most of the funds, the donor already comes with a structured objective area for you to fit in and sometimes you just struggle to carve the local situation to fit into the agenda of the donor. And that is what results in some of the implementation crisis; while mid-way with the implementation, the donor is not happy with you because you seem not to be pursuing their agenda. But then you are looking at the local situation and seeing how you can let the project work for the beneficiaries.

The excessive reliance as well as the vulnerability of these LNGOs loom large in the quotes above and we return to ways to build mechanisms for robust and sustainable funding. It is however important to note that the well-established organisations reported that once their sustainability was not contingent on receiving funding or bidding for projects advertised, it was relatively easier to turn the donors away if the conditionalities diverge significantly from the organisation's philosophies and core mandate. In all, only four LNGOs reported this independence from donor interference. The discussion above points to the interference of donor organisation with two important implications for the operations and sustainability of the LNGOs. Firstly, the vulnerabilities of LNGOs that are donor funding dependent which implies that they have to, out of necessity, accept conditionalities that may diverge from their mandate and beliefs to be able to survive. Secondly, the analysis also highlights the tension, including crisis midway during implementation as a result of the interference of the donors and an insistence on their agenda. Indeed, most participants lamented that as a result of donor insistence on their agenda, they have on occasion to extend their activities to areas outside of their mandate in order to continue to be operational.

Furthermore, the research participants were disillusioned about the apparent lack of commitment from state institutions in charge of social protection. According to them, most of the huge sums of donor funding are allocated to the ministries and departments and yet the effects are scarcely felt at the grassroots. One deputy CEO in UER, after lamenting over the apparent lack of interest in the local communities by the state institutions, suggested that:

I think the state needs to strengthen the local assemblies and allow them some space to implement their plans. We [LNGOs] are closer to the local assemblies and can create change. Allow the space and provide the resources for decentralized development. Then we have an opportunity to influence that space in ways that can empower women and girls.

Thus, if greater autonomy is granted to the decentralized departments, they can play a facilitating role that will help women's empowerment-based LNGOs in their advocacy. In practical terms, according to another CEO, the government should ensure that the Domestic Violence and Victim's Support Unit of the Ghana Police Service (DOVVSU), responsible for domestic violence issues, is located in every district in Ghana. As well, the staff of the Unit should be effectively equipped with training and personnel necessary to resolve domestic abuse issues. Once this unit is fully equipped to discharge its mandate, the LNGOs' advocacy work

will yield some understandings into the rights and privileges of women and girls and the resources available for seeking redress. Victims of dominant male power will be in a position to seek appropriate redress.

8. Towards a framework for decolonizing women's empowerment praxis

For the colonized, decolonization of the mind is really about returning to the annals of history to find ourselves, to become fluent in our cultural knowledge systems, to cultivate critical consciousness and to reclaim our humanity. (Tamale, 2020: 2)

In this section we provide a framework for decolonizing women's empowerment praxis. In the framework we reflect on ways to liberate women's empowerment praxis from Euro- and American-centrism and how to position LNGOs to respond effectively to crisis. The framework for decolonizing women's empowerment is composed of centring women's empowerment praxis on indigenous knowledge and value systems; encouraging African-philanthropism; developing financial independence via self-sustaining economic ventures and developing crisis management mechanisms.

First of all, we propose centring women's empowerment praxis on indigenous knowledge and value system. In the midst of the donor interferences and interests that on occasion vary from the focus of the LNGOs and the beneficiaries of empowerment interventions, it is imperative to frame women's empowerment praxis based on the local knowledge and value systems so as to effectively address women's complex challenges and vulnerabilities. To divest themselves of the neo-compradorism, real and perceived, these LNGOs need to anchor their philosophy, theory and practice on the local people's experiences, value systems and culture more effectively. For instance, the LNGOs need to take inspiration from indigenous people's conceptions and perspectives of empowerment and be guided by these in formulating their philosophy, theory and practice of women's empowerment. This will lead to activism that is informed by 'cultural knowledge' (Tamale, 2020: 2) and hence more effective at addressing women's vulnerabilities as well as building their resilience in the male-dominant settings of the study area.

Furthermore, one way to decolonize women's empowerment is to encourage African-philanthropism, that is, to encourage African-borne and based organizations that are in the position to support philanthropic work to commit more effectively to this.¹¹ Specifically, governmental and non-governmental organisations (particularly those engaged in advocacy and accountable governance) across the continent could spearhead discussions on how to garner support from African and Ghanaian-based organisations in the position to finance LNGOS activities. This, we suggest, will enable LNGOs to focus their activities at harnessing local value systems and rolling out interventions that are relevant to the cultures of the African people. Yet, this approach may not be without challenges. In the view of a CEO of an LNGO in UWR, in the past, together with other individuals, they recognized that 'the domination of Western funding agencies is such a huge issue. [A colleague] and I drew on the concept of African-philanthropism and we were interested in fashioning out modalities to help us get our own [African] people to finance our work. But there were a lot of challenges'. He explained further:

We had several virtual discussions but even to hold that meeting you have to go and find money; your research you are doing you have to go and find the funding from them [Western donors]. So, it is a long struggle but I believe it is possible. This whole concept of Ghana beyond aid can actually be achieved if we sit down strictly and say we are going to use what we have to produce what we eat; we can do that. But of course, our agricultural budget is almost 70% funded by the Western donors.

From the insights here, there are challenges to engendering self-sufficiencies, yet we suggest that this is an important step to liberating women's empowerment praxis from external domination so as to serve the beneficiaries more effectively and this is achievable in the long-run. Aid is not necessarily bad; instead LNGOs need to strategically position themselves to make meaningful use of the donor funding so that in the long-run they can become self-sufficient. The CEO above explains further:

We [LNGOs] need to strategically position ourselves in what resources we access and how we use those resources. Having access to western-led donor funding should not necessarily be a problem; what do we use if for... how will it lead to

¹¹ While we do acknowledge that the donor base for Ghanaian companies is limited, we are not restricting this to only Ghanaian and large-scale companies. We envisage support from across Africa; from such organizations and foundations and even individuals who are in a position to support philanthropic work across Ghana and Africa.

change in the status-quo in the future? We are beginning to do work that will help us build physical assets so that if tomorrow the donor says they are not going to give us money we can find money from the assets that we have.

The view above resonates with Arnfred and Ampofo's work. In relation to donor influence and feminists' activism, Arnfred and Ampofo (2009: 6) have observed that the issue is: '... how to take advantage of donor money while maintaining organizational autonomy, and how to deploy donor priorities to serve a feminist agenda.' Indeed, these authors emphasize that the main problem facing African women are defined in Western settings, although they are experienced across Africa. For them, this Western domination can be destabilized using money from the Western aid agencies. Bringing this to the thorny issue of donor agencies' influence on women's empowerment endeavors, we propose that it will be productive for these LNGOs to deploy the donor funds in ways that highlight indigenous cultural values and beliefs.

Closely related to the above, we propose the need to develop financial independence via establishing self-sustaining economic ventures. One way to overcome the dilemma of donor influence and LNGOs excessive dependence on them is to ensure financial independence so as to liberate these LNGOs from Western domination. A CEO in NR informed us that:

Because of our [LNGOs] own survival, we are not bold enough to negotiate; and say 'if it is this we won't take'. We end up doing 'yes sir', 'yes sir'. But as time goes on if the donors realize the LNGOs will not badge on certain things easily they will always come back because they realize the kind of work you do is what they need. It is just the same with power; when someone wants to bully you and they realize that they can't bully you after some time they give up. But of course, it is understandable because if you are an organization that has to think about your livelihood and where the employees' salary will come, it is difficult to make some of these decisions. We try to generate extra incomes for ourselves to be able to develop our independence.

From the views above we see how financial constraints serve as stumbling block to the LNGOs liberating themselves and their activities of foreign domination. There is therefore the need for the LNGOs to build strong institutions and put in place systems that will promote income-generation activities. Once the LNGOs are able to generate their own incomes, they will be in

a position to decide their own agenda and this will enhance sustainability and promote empowerment praxis premised on their own terms. This is critical to developing independence and decolonization.

Finally, to better position themselves in order to respond to and mitigate the effects of crisis (Branicki, 2020), the LNGOs need to develop crisis management mechanisms. These mechanisms should be based on the indigenous knowledge, belief systems and practices of the beneficiaries so that once implemented, they can project African values. These mechanisms should also clearly outline the measures as well as implementation plan in the event of crisis and how to manage the aftermath of crisis. These will be useful in ensuring that the LNGOs are robust to withstand the shocks of crisis and to continue the labour of women's empowerment in crisis.

9. Conclusions: Implications for decolonizing women's empowerment praxis

In this article, we examined LNGOs approaches to women's empowerment in crisis and specifically during the covid-19 pandemic and the implications for decolonizing, liberating women's empowerment praxis from imperialist domination (Mignolo, 2011; Tamale, 2020) in contexts located in northern Ghana. The article relied on decolonial and postcolonial critique of development praxis and combined these with feminist discourses on crisis management to analyse LNGOs approaches to women's empowerment in crisis. The findings of this research contribute immensely to our understanding of the nature of vulnerability of women and LNGOs approaches to women's empowerment in crisis. Moreover, our findings provide a unique perspective on crises management and the approaches to developing resilience by LNGOs. The study also makes a unique contribution to decolonising development praxis in this and similar contexts. Based on the findings, the study further proposes a framework for decolonising women's empowerment theory and practice. Finally, this study adds to the nascent literature on Covid-19 and the impact on women's empowerment in a developing context.

The LNGOs deploy varied approaches, but a central leitmotif is the claim to draw on indigenous cultural norms and blend these with national and international frameworks for negotiating women's rights. In this endeavour, our study also revealed that the LNGOs, although are seeking to give voices to women and to empower them as subalterns to speak, they are mindful that without involving the male community leaders, heads of households and

husbands, their interventions are unlikely to achieve any meaningful successes. In this regard, their approaches reverberate with African feminists perspectives that argue that feminism in Africa has to be all inclusive (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Ogunyemi, 1985).¹² The LNGOs' approaches range from instrumentalist interventions such as the distribution of food items and micro-credit facilities to those addressing structural issues, for example, ending violence against women and girls, supporting teenage mothers to return to school or to learn a trade, and advocacy on women's rights and gender justice (see also Apusigah, 2004; Akurugu et al. 2021).

In all, the LNGOs who participated in our study had to modify their interventions to address specific needs of the beneficiaries arising from the Covid-19 crises and its ramifications. All LNGOs reported that they have carried out Covid-19 awareness creation interventions. Most of them also rolled out interventions targeting practical gender needs, including food, healthcare facilities and micro-credit facilities. This is in recognition that meeting these needs have become more urgent in this time of the crises as sources of incomes, mostly through petty-trading in the deprived settings of the study, diminish significantly.

The LNGOs are extremely reliant on Western-centric neo-liberal capitalist aid agencies for sustenance. Consequently, they are critically constrained by dwindling donor funding in general and at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, LNGOs' activities are constrained by such political rhetoric as the 'Ghana beyond aid' and western-centric donor ideals and conditionalities, which are sometimes at variance with the cultures of the beneficiary communities. We propose that for women's empowerment to achieve meaningful results in general and at the time of crisis, both discourse and practice need to be anchored on the value systems, beliefs and norms of the implementing LNGOs and the women. This will ensure that the interventions are sensitive to the cultures and value systems of the beneficiary women and thus enhance sustainability. And this centring on indigenous knowledge is critical to nurturing women' agency.

Closely related to the above, the centring on indigenous knowledge can be meaningfully realized if the LNGOs develop financial independence so that they can set their own agenda. To achieve this, we suggest that the funding agencies should partner the LNGOs and invest in

¹² Tamale (2020: 11) draws attention to the African 'people's shared and enduring legacies of enslavement, colonialism, racism and neoliberalism' and indeed economic deprivation.

income-generation interventions that will facilitate growth and sustainability. These LNGOs will be self-sustaining in the long-run so that they can become self-financing. This is important to divesting the LNGOs of Western donors and to promote their resilience in crisis so that they can in turn perform women's empowerment work more effectively, in crisis. This will help them in the future to overcome excessive reliance on Western-led donor agencies. It will also help the donors to eschew charges that cast them as philanthro-capitalist and as serving Western dominant neoliberal interests. Following this, empowerment praxis will be better situated to support women by enabling them to absorb the shocks that attend crisis and beyond and hence avoid descending into abysmal poverty. Ultimately, decolonizing women's empowerment would 'deal a significant blow' to Western imperialism, philanthro-capitalism and male domination (Tamale, 2020: 284), and indeed more importantly project indigenous northern Ghana cultural values and ideals.

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