

# Building Resiliency in Community Development: The Experiences of Women in Rural Communities in Ghana

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## Abstract

In Ghana, women face challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, restricted legal rights, and entrenched gender roles, impeding their empowerment. Despite these barriers, they exhibit remarkable resilience, often through active engagement in community development initiatives. Previous studies highlight the importance of collective solidarity and intergenerational support in fostering resilience among Ghanaian women. However, these studies frequently apply external frameworks that conceptualize resilience as an internal attribute. This qualitative study explores the intrinsic motivations and support mechanisms that underpin resilience among Ghanaian women ( $N = 12$ ) actively participating in community development efforts. Thematic analysis of interviews reveals that their resilience is greatly influenced by concerns for their children’s future and strengthened by strong familial and community support networks. This research enriches our understanding of resilience by highlighting authentic sources rooted in the lived experiences of Ghanaian women, challenging conventional perceptions and emphasizing both individual and community-level factors.

## Keywords

community development; gender equality; resilience; rural Ghana; women

## 1. Introduction

Achieving gender equality remains a global concern, marked by numerous obstacles that hinder women’s progress. These barriers include disparities in rights, unequal pay, limited access to education, and pervasive physical and sexual violence (Funk & Molina, 2021; Wolf et al., 2016). In many African countries, including Ghana, these challenges are further compounded by unequal property and inheritance rights, restricted access to education, and limited participation in social, economic, and political spheres (S. Boateng & Poku,

2019; Sassler et al., 2017). African women, particularly those in rural communities, disproportionately experience poverty and food insecurity, which are both causes and consequences of deeply entrenched gender inequalities (Addai et al., 2022; Brion & Ampah-Mensah, 2021).

The landscape for gender equality in rural communities in Africa is further complicated by cultural and religious traditions that limit women's participation in many areas of life, particularly in decision-making, formal education, and financial management (Egyir et al., 2023; Kilu et al., 2020). In Ghana, cultural norms and traditional gender roles perpetuate high rates of poverty and illiteracy among women in rural communities, who face limited political mobility, the high cost of "bride price," and the dual responsibilities of agriculture and domestic labor (Castillo et al., 2013). Although existing research emphasizes the resilience of Ghanaian women, much of it focuses on specific contexts such as gender dynamics, geographic regions, or socio-economic factors (Adusah-Poku & Takeuchi, 2019). However, there remains a gap in understanding how women in rural communities in Ghana demonstrate resilience within their distinct socio-cultural environments. Most of the literature tends to highlight personal traits like faith, optimism, and self-confidence (Adusah-Poku et al., 2021), while the broader, community-based aspects of resilience remain underexplored.

This study aims to contribute to bridging this gap by examining the resilience of women in rural Ghana who engage in a range of community development activities, such as serving in elected roles, volunteering, advocating for girls' education, and participating in civic initiatives. The research takes an "inside-out" approach to resilience, emphasizing that resilience is an inherent capacity that emerges organically from within individuals and their communities (J. A. K. Alhassan et al., 2020; Asante et al., 2020). Unlike the conventional "outside-in" approach, which views resilience as something imposed through external interventions, the "inside-out" perspective sees resilience as a dynamic process built on cultural values, social networks, and personal strengths (Agyemang et al., 2016; Ningpuanyeh & Susuman, 2016). This study is significant as it demonstrates how women in rural communities in Ghana draw on local resources and social bonds to navigate adversity, rather than relying solely on external assistance or support.

This perspective is particularly relevant for women in rural communities in Ghana, who face systemic challenges like poverty, gender inequality, and limited access to education (Chulker et al., 2023; Ngulube, 2018; Tostan, 2024). These women often rely on local knowledge, cultural practices, and personal motivation to overcome these barriers (Dwomoh et al., 2019; Kanmiki et al., 2014). By focusing on their lived experiences, this study challenges the external frameworks that view resilience as dependent on outside support, such as NGO interventions (Musah & Adutwumwaa, 2021). While projects like the 2015 Climate-Resilient Agricultural and Food Systems initiative and the 2017 Water for Resilience project have provided critical support through improved agricultural techniques and water management systems (Dary & Ustarz, 2020; Somanje et al., 2020), these efforts often overlook the adaptive strategies that women in rural communities in Ghana have already developed and the inherent characteristic arising naturally within the women themselves.

This article delves into the dynamic and complex nature of resilience among women in rural communities in Ghana, examining how cultural, intergenerational, and community factors influence their capacity to navigate and surmount obstacles. By focusing on women's perspectives and voices, this study enriches our understanding of resilience and provides unique insights that can inform more gender-inclusive community development initiatives in Ghana and potentially other similar contexts globally. The emphasis on "inside-out

resilience” highlights the unique contribution of this study, setting it apart from previous research and underscoring its significance in the broader discourse on gender equality and community development. There is limited research into the resiliency practices of women in Ghana and other parts of Africa. Thus, this study highlights systemic and social changes that women in rural communities in Ghana have been able to bring about within their communities to cultivate community belonging, resiliency, and transformative collective action.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Introduction

This literature review examines how women in rural Ghana demonstrate resilience within the context of community development. The emphasis is on how these women embody resilience, playing vital roles in strengthening and maintaining community resilience despite various challenges. By focusing on their experiences and contributions, this review offers an understanding of the dynamic interplay between obstacles and resilience strategies, while exploring how resilience-building efforts can promote gender equality and sustainable community development.

### 2.2. Community Development and Resilience Building

Community development and resilience building are interrelated processes essential for achieving sustainable growth in regions facing socio-economic and environmental challenges (Amundsen, 2012; Sumardjo et al., 2023). Community development refers to efforts aimed at improving the well-being of individuals and communities through social, economic, and environmental improvements (Amundsen, 2012). Resilience building, on the other hand, enhances a community's ability to withstand, adapt to, and recover from crises while ensuring long-term sustainability (Sumardjo et al., 2023; Woodruff et al., 2018). Together, these concepts create a framework for fostering inclusive development and addressing vulnerabilities (Sumardjo et al., 2023).

Michael Ungar's ecological theory of resilience provides valuable insights into understanding resilience within a community development framework (Jacobson et al., 2018). Ungar defines resilience as the capacity of individuals and communities to navigate their way to resources that sustain their well-being, in ways that are meaningful and culturally relevant (Bergstrand et al., 2015). His theory emphasizes that resilience is not solely an individual trait but is heavily influenced by the availability of resources and the social and environmental contexts in which individuals and communities operate (Beery, 2019). This ecological perspective aligns well with community development efforts, where access to resources, social networks, and supportive systems are central to building resilience (Napawan et al., 2017).

One of the core principles of resilience building in community development is participatory engagement (Ganle et al., 2015; Kenny et al., 2014). This approach ensures that community members, particularly marginalized groups such as women, are actively involved in decision-making processes (Malapit & Quisumbing, 2015; Scott, 2013). Empowering local populations to shape the development initiatives that affect them allows for more contextually relevant solutions (Agyemang et al., 2016; Yaya et al., 2018). For instance, women in rural communities in Ghana, who are often at the forefront of community challenges,

can offer unique insights into the types of support and strategies that best address their needs and the broader needs of their communities (Dickson & Amu, 2016). By involving these women in decision-making, communities are not only addressing immediate challenges but also fostering long-term resilience (Kenny et al., 2014; Scott, 2013).

### ***2.3. The Evolving Roles and Challenges of Rural Women in Community Development in Ghana***

The roles of women in rural Ghanaian communities have evolved significantly, becoming central to the country's community development efforts (Ebenezer et al., 2020; Owusu-Manu et al., 2021). Traditionally, women were tasked with household responsibilities, including family sustenance, farming, and caregiving (D. Adom et al., 2020). However, their involvement in community development has expanded over time, and women now play a vital role in grassroots empowerment, leadership, and advocacy for social change (Baddianaah, 2023). Despite these advancements, women continue to face considerable challenges such as societal expectations, limited resources, and gendered power dynamics (Mensah, 2023; Yalley et al., 2023). Studies in disciplines such as gender studies, development economics, and rural sociology explore both the progress women in rural communities in Ghana have made and the obstacles they still encounter (F. K. Boateng & Gaulee, 2019).

Historically, rural women in Ghana have been primarily responsible for household duties such as farming and caregiving, with their roles shaped by patriarchal norms (Agbaglo et al., 2022; Ganle et al., 2014). Around 70% of rural women engage in agriculture, mainly for subsistence purposes (Angko et al., 2023), while 65% report household chores and caregiving as their main responsibilities, limiting their external opportunities (Lori et al., 2014). Despite these limitations, women in rural communities in Ghana are becoming increasingly active in decision-making and leadership, with their representation in local governance increasing from 22% in 2006 to 38% in 2016 (Adatara et al., 2020). Many women in rural communities in Ghana now lead initiatives in education, health, and environmental sustainability, with 58% of those involved in community health taking on active advocacy roles in Ghana (Ogundele et al., 2018). However, patriarchal structures continue to restrict their influence, as 60% of women report cultural norms limiting their participation in decision-making (Donkoh et al., 2022). Even among those in leadership positions, only 30% feel their contributions are adequately valued according to studies by Sialubanje et al. (2015). A feminist perspective emphasizes the need for systemic changes to fully empower women in community development in Ghana (Adatara et al., 2020).

Women in rural Ghana are not only agricultural laborers but are increasingly managing cooperatives, engaging in sustainable farming practices, and accessing new markets (Asitik & Abu, 2020; Vanderpuye et al., 2020). However, despite these advancements, they continue to face unequal access to critical resources such as land, credit, and technology (Boone & Duku, 2012; Lambrecht, 2016). Rural women in Ghana constitute approximately 70% of the agricultural workforce but own only about 10% of the land (Asitik & Abu, 2020). Moreover, studies show that only 20% of women have access to formal credit, limiting their ability to invest in more productive agricultural methods (Atta et al., 2020). Feminist economic scholars argue that these disparities reflect deep-seated structural inequalities that devalue women's economic contributions and reinforce male dominance in land ownership (Lambrecht, 2016). Addressing these imbalances through equitable redistribution of land and resources is seen as essential for enabling women to fully exercise their economic agency and contribute to sustainable development (Antwi-Agyei et al., 2015; Narh et al., 2016).

In addition to economic contributions, women in rural communities in Ghana are leaders in addressing community health and education challenges (Asamoah et al., 2014; Atuoye et al., 2015). Research highlights that they play a crucial role in advocating for maternal health, nutrition, and child education, leveraging their deep understanding of community needs (R. K. Alhassan & Nketiah-Amponsah, 2016; Zere et al., 2012). However, limited resources, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and minimal government support pose major obstacles (Dankwah et al., 2019; Enuameh et al., 2016). The Ghana Statistical Service reports that maternal mortality rates are highest in rural areas with insufficient healthcare services (Budu, 2020; Johnson et al., 2013). While rural women often act as first responders in health crises, their efforts are hindered by a lack of access to professional training and medical resources in Ghana (Mohammed, 2023; Ogundele et al., 2018). Feminist scholars argue that rural women's caregiving roles are socially constructed and undervalued, resulting in gender inequality in the health sector (J. Alhassan & Castelli, 2019; Kunna et al., 2017).

A major challenge for rural women in Ghana is the burden of unpaid labor. Despite taking on larger roles in community development, they continue to bear household responsibilities, creating a “double burden” that strains their health and limits their capacity to lead (Ifeoma, 2023; Nanko & Teng-Zeng, 2022). According to the Ghana Statistical Service, rural women in Ghana spend significantly more time than men on unpaid care work, hindering their ability to participate fully in leadership roles (Ifeoma, 2023). Feminist theories argue that this unpaid labor must be recognized and redistributed to achieve gender equality in both domestic and public spheres (Arslan, 2020; Kotiswaran, 2023). Only through addressing these issues can rural women reach their full potential in community development (Pritlove et al., 2018; Solomon-Godeau, 2022).

#### ***2.4. Factors Supporting the Resilience of Rural Women in Community Development in Ghana***

Women in rural communities in Ghana demonstrate remarkable resilience in community development, driven by a deep motivation to secure better educational and economic opportunities for their families (Twumasi et al., 2022; Zhi & Zhao, 2021). Studies from the fields of sociology, development studies, and education reveal that this strong desire for improvement fuels their engagement in initiatives that benefit not only their families but also the broader community in the long term (Wang et al., 2020; Zhi & Zhao, 2021). Within the education discipline, research highlights how education acts as a powerful tool for breaking the cycle of poverty, equipping individuals with the skills necessary to contribute meaningfully to community development and decision-making processes (Sartorius et al., 2011; Twumasi et al., 2022).

From a development studies perspective, rural women in Ghana believe that educating their children equips them with the tools to escape economic hardship and foster personal empowerment (Angko & Wulifan, 2022; Bradley et al., 2011). They also recognize that entrepreneurial training and educational programs reduce vulnerability to economic shocks and enhance the community's overall resilience (Barasa et al., 2018; Rosser et al., 2017). Studies in governance and community development indicate that individuals with education are more likely to participate in local governance and community meetings, highlighting the direct link between education and active community involvement (Budu, 2020; Sakeah et al., 2014). For rural women, education is not only a pathway to personal growth but also a means to drive broader community progress (Adataro et al., 2020; Adu et al., 2018). By advocating for education, these women are ensuring that future generations have greater opportunities, thereby strengthening the long-term resilience of their communities (Kodaman et al., 2016; Stafford et al., 2010).

The role of family support is well-documented across the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and community development (Gyan & Kpoor, 2022; Steiner & Atterton, 2014). Emotional, physical, and practical support from family members plays a critical role in enhancing both community resilience and individual resilience among women in rural communities in Ghana (Ong et al., 2018; Simkhada et al., 2008). Family support fosters positive emotions such as hope and optimism, which are crucial for managing stress and building personal resilience, particularly in the demanding environments of rural Ghana (Evans et al., 2015). Sociological research also underscores that family support, particularly in childcare, allows women to pursue income-generating activities and participate in community projects (Adatara et al., 2021; Miller & Smith, 2017). This enables them to balance household responsibilities with their contributions to local development efforts (Adjei, 2017). In times of stress or crises, family resilience helps members adapt, promoting both the collective well-being of the family and greater engagement in community life (Middendorp et al., 2013; Quintanilha et al., 2016).

In the context of community psychology, emotional satisfaction and a strong sense of belonging are critical factors supporting the resilience of women in rural communities in Ghana (Adu et al., 2018; Bohren et al., 2015). Studies in psychology and community development show that a sense of belonging significantly contributes to their involvement in community development (Agyemang et al., 2016; Balde et al., 2017). Research indicates that when women feel included and accepted within their communities, it creates a supportive environment that empowers them to overcome obstacles (Dankwah et al., 2019; Dixon et al., 2013;). This sense of belonging is crucial for building individual resilience, allowing women to navigate the complex social and economic challenges they face daily in rural Ghana (Adjei, 2017; Budu, 2020). Women with strong community ties are more likely to engage in local development initiatives and participate in resilience-building activities (Avisah et al., 2018; Williams, 2013). These connections not only foster personal growth but also amplify their role as leaders in community development efforts (Adatara et al., 2020). The emotional fulfillment they derive from these interactions motivates them to contribute actively to the well-being of their communities, further reinforcing their resilience in the face of adversity (Gudu & Addo, 2017; Middendorp et al., 2013).

The active engagement of rural women in community development plays a critical role in strengthening their resilience in Ghana (Asitik, 2023; Bawa et al., 2017). Women's participation in community initiatives equips them with critical skills, knowledge, and social networks that enable them to adapt to changing circumstances and overcome various challenges (K. Adom & Asare-Yeboah, 2016). Additionally, their involvement in community projects enhances leadership abilities, builds social capital, and promotes collective action, all of which are essential for fostering resilience in individuals and communities (Gundewar & Chin, 2020). In rural Ghana, communal life and social support networks are central to resilience-building (Stewart et al., 2015). Women rely on these networks to share resources, knowledge, and experiences, helping them manage socio-economic challenges more effectively (Yambah et al., 2022). Studies in development sociology highlight the importance of collective support in reinforcing both individual and community resilience by fostering a sense of solidarity and shared responsibility (Wemakor, 2019). This sense of belonging motivates rural women to remain actively engaged in community development, improving both their own lives and the resilience of their communities (Appiah et al., 2021).



### 3. Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in the resiliency theory, specifically drawing upon Ungar's ecological theory of resilience, with emphasis on the "inside-out" perspective. Resilience theories fundamentally capture the adaptability to and triumph over adversity by assessing a range of traits, both internal and external to the individual. While historical explorations of resilience span diverse domains and disciplines, prevailing definitions within resilience theories often emphasize individual characteristics as primary determinants, acknowledging the significance of external factors but assigning them a secondary role. In the realm of social sciences, resilience is commonly defined concerning the successful navigation of challenging experiences and the resultant personal growth. In contrast to deficit-focused approaches, resilience theory adopts a strengths-based and positive perspective, elucidating the factors that contribute to overcoming adversity (Ledesma, 2014). Resilience theories traditionally focus on individual adaptability and triumph over adversity, often assessing internal traits such as optimism, problem-solving abilities, and determination (Ledesma, 2014). However, Ungar's ecological theory expands this view by emphasizing that resilience emerges not just from individual traits but from the interaction between individuals and their surrounding social, cultural, and environmental contexts. Ungar's ecological theory of resilience extends beyond individual traits, recognizing both internal and external factors as pivotal predictors of resilience (Ledesma, 2014).

Drawing upon this "inside-out" perspective or model, Ungar posits that the social, cultural, and intrapersonal traits contextualizing an individual's experience play interweaving roles in the development and application of resilience. He defines resilience as "a set of behaviors over time that reflect the interactions between individuals and their environments, in particular the opportunities for personal growth that are available and accessible" (Ungar, 2012 p. 14; see also Ungar, 2018, 2021). Ungar conceptualizes resilience as an active process developed through experience, rather than a pre-existing trait, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between an individual's ability to engage with both internal and external resources and the accessibility and cultural significance of external resources. This synthesis of personal agency with social and systemic support characterizes resilience as a negotiation between an individual and their "social ecology" (Ungar, 2012, p. 17, 2018, 2021).

This "inside-out" perspective is particularly relevant to the study of rural women's resilience in Ghana because it shifts the focus from external interventions (such as aid or formal support systems) to the inherent strengths and resources already present within communities. In rural Ghana, where systemic challenges like poverty, gender inequality, and limited access to education persist, women often rely on internal community-based resources—such as local knowledge, social networks, and cultural values—to build and sustain resilience (Agyemang et al., 2016; J. A. K. Alhassan et al., 2020). By highlighting this internal capacity, the "inside-out" approach emphasizes that resilience is not solely an outcome of external support but is deeply rooted in women's ability to draw on their own cultural and social capital to navigate challenges.

Focusing on women's resilience in rural Ghana allows for an exploration of how these women actively engage in community development, overcoming obstacles with the help of family, community structures, and intergenerational cultural practices. This is critical for understanding their role in fostering resilience within the broader socio-ecological system. Their participation in local initiatives, advocacy for girls' education, and leadership in community projects highlight the ways in which resilience emerges organically from within, rather than being externally imposed (Dwomoh et al., 2019; Ningpuanyeh & Susuman, 2016).

By adopting Ungar’s “inside-out” perspective, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of resilience in rural settings, challenging the dominant “outside-in” narrative that views resilience as the result of external interventions. Instead, it underscores the importance of recognizing and enhancing the intrinsic capacities of women and communities in Ghana for sustainable development.

#### 4. Research Methodology

This qualitative study aimed to honour subjectivity, and constructivism recognizing the inability of researchers to fully separate themselves from their subjective lens which shapes the results of their research (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Schwandt, 1994; White, & Davis, 2023). According to Moran (2000) the subjective view of experience [is] a necessary part of any full understanding of the nature of knowledge. We prioritized the subjective lived experience of the research participants above normative cultural understandings of the meaning of their experiences (Moran, 2000). This approach allowed us to understand the individual meanings given to experiences of resilience within community development by women in Ghana. Twelve women ( $N = 12$ ) were recruited from three rural communities in Ghana: Bolni (Northern Region), Yawhimakrom (Brong Ahafo Region), and Mayera Faase (Greater Accra Region). These communities were selected for their regional diversity, allowing the study to capture a range of experiences related to community development. Bolni represents the predominantly rural Northern Region, Yawhimakrom focuses on agriculture in the Brong Ahafo Region, and Mayera Faase provides insights into the peri-urban dynamics of the Greater Accra Region. Participants, aged 25 to 50, were involved in various community development activities. This sample included five women working as officials in NGOs and community-based organizations and seven women actively engaged in community efforts. Some participants were married, others were single, but all were mothers, enriching their perspectives on balancing family and community responsibilities.

To mitigate biases and power dynamics, peer interviewers who shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds with the participants were selected to conduct the interviews. These peer interviewers underwent a four-day training program focused on building interview skills, ethics, and sensitivity toward the participants’ lived experiences. This approach minimized cultural barriers, fostering an open and trusting dialogue. In-depth interviews were conducted in local dialects (Likpakpaln, Twi, and Ga), using an open-ended interview guide designed to elicit detailed interpretations of the participants’ experiences. All interviews were conducted after obtaining explicit verbal consent, adhering to Wilfrid Laurier University’s Research Ethics guidelines. Anonymization of responses was ensured during transcription and analysis to protect participant confidentiality. The interviews were translated into English and transcribed for analysis. We employed thematic analysis, a method particularly suitable for identifying patterns and themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed us to explore how rural women in Ghana perceive and navigate resilience within the context of community development. Thematic analysis involved reading the transcriptions multiple times to become familiar with the data, followed by creating preliminary codes to categorize recurring topics. This process was iterative, as we revisited the data to identify overlooked patterns and refine our initial codes. Ultimately, we developed a final set of themes that captured the women’s experiences, ensuring a comprehensive interpretation of their resilience in community development. By acknowledging our own positionality as researchers, we approached the data with openness, allowing the voices of women in rural communities in Ghana to drive the narrative of resilience and their active roles in community development.



## 5. Results

This study sought to highlight the intrinsic resilience of Ghanaian women participating in community development activities, examining the specific factors supporting and motivating women's resilience. Qualitative analyses revealed several supporting and motivating factors behind women's resilience, including concern for their children's future, familial support, social support, and punishment for non-involvement.

### 5.1. *Future of Their Children*

Women in rural Ghana strongly believe their children should have a better standard of living. Motivated by this, they see their children's future as a key driver of their resilience. The desire to provide educational opportunities emerged as a prominent theme, leading participants to engage in community development activities to ensure access to education and healthcare. This shift from traditional practices reflects a progressive approach aimed at empowerment through education. For instance, a participant emphasized:

When I look back, the positive thing that makes me continue to be part of the process is the need to help our children. We didn't have girls who were educated. We used to prepare them for marriage and as a result they couldn't speak or understand English but now we have stopped this practice. (Queen mother 1).

Another participant echoed this sentiment, explaining that "the future of my children pushes me to be part of any development activities we do in this community...when there is light, children can study well" (Diana). These narratives underscored the pivotal role the future of their children played in motivating their resilience.

### 5.2. *Breaking the Cycle of Poverty and Ignorance*

The study found that women's desire to break the cycle of ignorance and poverty motivates them to engage in community development despite challenges. They recognize that altering the educational pathway for girls can break this cycle, highlighting new possibilities for empowerment and development. This transformative vision positions education as central to fostering enlightenment and progress in the community. This is supported by a respondent who indicated: "We want to...educate them so that one day they will feed us. We don't want them to also remain in our darkness" (Queen mother 1).

The above statement further highlights that participating in community development, despite barriers, offers girls educational opportunities, preparing them to contribute economically and socially. It underscores the belief that investing in girls' education leads to personal empowerment and supports the community's economic sustainability.

### 5.3. *Familial Support*

Familial support emerged as a crucial protective factor, boosting women's resilience in community development processes. The physical and emotional comfort provided by family members played a significant role in fostering resilience. While some women received strong support, others faced occasional discouragement, highlighting the complex interplay between family dynamics and women's resilience.

For example, one participant noted the significant role her family played in supporting her, stating: “My family has been very supportive. Their support and encouragement have been very helpful to me in this whole election issues” (Mary). Another respondent echoed this, indicating:

There is one of my brothers who lectures at GIMPA [Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration] He helps me in proposal writing, petition and even just yesterday, he spent about six hours writing a petition for me...in most times he assists me in cooking, washing, and taking care of the children. Even as I am here, I have been away for three days, and my husband is home to take care of the children while am away. (Afia)

The study further found that family-supported community engagement and networking boost rural women’s resilience and influence in community projects. This extended support network is vital for accessing resources and improving community infrastructure. By staying connected and proactive, rural women enhance their visibility and impact, fostering resilience in themselves and their communities. This is supported by a respondent: “Even yesterday he called that urban roads are around and looking for where to do culvert and I asked him to assist them, which he did” (Afia). However, challenges were also acknowledged, with Yaa stating: “My parents think it is a difficult work, so I should stop and do better work for a living or else I will continue to work for nothing.”

Another participant expressed: “Eei iii but as for my parents, they want me to stop this assembly woman [a representative at the local government level] work especially with the current difficulties I am going through” (Afia)

The study highlights the complex dynamics of familial support for women in community development. Families’ ambivalent support fluctuates between pride in women’s public successes and expectations of domestic roles, reflecting societal norms. Success boosts women’s social standing and self-esteem, essential for resilience, but balancing these expectations with home duties can cause stress and conflict, affecting their psychological resilience. A respondent indicated that:

At times they [the family] are happy....But when am going through difficulties they discourage me. Oooh as for my husband, he is also 50–50 because at times I have to leave my responsibilities at home and lobby for my electoral area which sometimes he doesn’t like but after I succeed in bringing any development to the area, they all become happy and he says, ‘this is my wife’ but when I neglect my duties and he gets angry. (Afia)

#### **5.4. Participation in Community Development Activities**

The study found that active participation in community development builds resilience for rural women in Ghana. This involvement provides purpose, strengthens community bonds, and allows women to influence and achieve a sense of belonging. These experiences foster a supportive network and enhance social capital, crucial for overcoming challenges. In line with this, one participant indicated:

The first time I took part in activities in this community was when we were building our clinic and also cleaning our cemetery, after these activities, I have always taken part in some of these activities organised in this community. (Diana)

### **5.5. Collective/Social Support and Communal Life**

The strong emphasis on communal life in Ghanaian culture is evident in participants' experiences. Community development activities address social issues and provide personal support. Sharing and supportive exchanges during these activities are crucial for fostering resilience among these rural women. This network provides practical and emotional resources to cope with challenges, enhancing community belonging and self-efficacy among the women. Through these interactions, women contribute to their community and reinforce their capacity to withstand and adapt to adversities. In line with this, one participant explained:

The first one was really interesting. We learnt a lot, share our problems with others while we work, and help each other through advice. All this pushes me to attend communal labour. (Diana)

Another participant re-echoed this, saying: "I have love for the community and believe that when I participate in activities, any time I have a problem, people will be willing to help me out so I go out to participate in most activities" (Mercy).

### **5.6. Emotional Fulfillment and Community Belonging**

The study found that integration and acceptance are crucial for rural women's mental health and well-being, acting as an emotional reservoir during challenges. Community belonging and participation in communal activities strengthen emotional ties and purpose, enhancing personal resilience and helping women handle adversities more effectively. This is highlighted by one of the respondents who indicated that "the feeling of being part of a community and having all these people to fall on whenever you have a problem makes me feel fulfilled whenever I attend communal labour" (Ama).

The findings reveal that Ghanaian rural women's resilience is supported by aspirations for their children's future and strong community and familial support. The desire to secure better opportunities for their children motivates women to engage in community projects, while family and community support provides emotional comfort and enhances their capacity to overcome challenges. This resilience is sustained by a blend of individual aspirations and collective support, showcasing a multifaceted approach to overcoming adversity and fostering sustainable community development.

## **6. Discussion**

This discussion draws on the results of the study and the literature review to explore how specific factors contribute to the resilience of rural women in community development in Ghana. Using Michael Ungar's ecological theory of resilience as a framework, the discussion focuses on six key themes: the future of their children, breaking the cycle of poverty and ignorance, familial support, participation in community development activities, collective/social support and communal life, and emotional fulfillment and community belonging. These themes are analyzed in relation to how they strengthen the resilience of women in rural Ghanaian communities.

One of the central motivations driving the resilience of rural women in Ghana is their desire to secure a better future for their children. The study reveals that these women are deeply committed to ensuring their children,

particularly their daughters, have access to education. This shift marks a significant departure from traditional practices that prepared girls for early marriage, which limited their future opportunities. The prioritization of education for girls is seen as a transformative approach to breaking down barriers and empowering the next generation.

This finding aligns with feminist perspectives that emphasize the critical role of education in challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender equality (Adatara et al., 2020; Adu et al., 2018). As rural women shift from a focus on preparing girls for marriage to prioritizing their education, they are not only enhancing their children's opportunities but also reshaping societal expectations. Education is viewed as a tool for empowerment, equipping girls with the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in decision-making processes and contribute to broader community development (Bradley et al., 2011; Budu, 2020).

Ungar's ecological theory emphasizes that resilience is shaped by the ability to access culturally relevant resources that support well-being (Ungar, 2012). In this context, education serves as a key resource, enabling rural women to foster resilience in themselves and their children. By investing in their daughters' education, these women are building a foundation for long-term resilience, ensuring that the next generation is better equipped to navigate socio-economic challenges and take on leadership roles within their communities. This forward-looking approach reflects a growing recognition among rural women that empowering girls through education will not only improve their individual prospects but also contribute to the sustainability of their communities.

The desire to break the cycle of poverty and ignorance emerged as another key motivator behind rural women's engagement in community development in Ghana. Participants expressed a commitment to improving their children's educational outcomes as a means of overcoming economic hardship. Historically, limited access to education has perpetuated economic hardships and reinforced traditional gender roles that hindered women's full participation in society. By prioritizing education for their children, especially daughters, rural women are working to dismantle these barriers and open pathways to economic empowerment and social progress.

From an economic perspective, this focus on education is closely tied to feminist economic theories that highlight the importance of addressing gendered disparities in access to education and economic opportunities (Atta et al., 2020; Narh et al., 2016). Educating girls equips them with the knowledge and skills necessary to overcome socio-economic barriers, which not only fosters personal empowerment but also contributes to household income generation and community economic development (Angko & Wulifan, 2022; Sartorius et al., 2011). As these educated girls grow into women, they often gain access to higher-paying jobs, entrepreneurial opportunities, and financial autonomy, all of which contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty that has traditionally limited rural women's economic participation.

By advocating for education, rural women are not only addressing immediate needs but are also laying the foundation for long-term economic growth and resilience in their communities. This shift ensures that future generations can escape the economic constraints that have shaped their own lives, ultimately leading to greater economic equity and the strengthening of community development initiatives.

Again, familial support emerged as a critical factor in fostering the resilience of rural women in Ghana. The study found that the emotional, physical, and practical assistance provided by family members,

particularly spouses and siblings, played a significant role in enabling women to balance their domestic responsibilities with their community development activities. This finding resonates with the broader literature, which highlights the importance of familial networks in supporting resilience, particularly in marginalized communities (Gyan & Kpoor, 2022; Steiner & Atterton, 2014).

Ungar's ecological theory emphasizes that resilience is not an individual trait but is shaped by the availability of supportive resources within one's environment (Ungar, 2012). For rural women in Ghana, the support they receive from their families allows them to navigate the complexities of their dual roles in both the domestic and public spheres. Family members often take on household chores or childcare duties, freeing women to participate more fully in leadership and decision-making processes within their communities (Adjei, 2017). This practical assistance enhances women's capacity to contribute to community development without being overwhelmed by the burdens of unpaid domestic labor, which is a common challenge faced by women in rural areas (Nanko & Teng-Zeng, 2022).

However, the study also revealed the complex dynamics of familial support, where societal expectations sometimes conflicted with women's ambitions. Some family members expressed concerns about the challenges associated with public leadership roles, reflecting broader societal norms that continue to place significant domestic burdens on women (Boone & Duku, 2012). These tensions highlight the need for a cultural shift that recognizes the value of women's contributions to both the domestic and public spheres, as feminist scholars argue that achieving true gender equality requires addressing these deeply embedded expectations (Kotiswaran, 2023).

Furthermore, familial support was identified as a crucial factor in enhancing the resilience of rural women engaged in community development in Ghana. The study found that emotional, physical, and practical support from family members, particularly in managing domestic responsibilities, allowed women to participate more fully in community development activities. This finding echoes earlier research that highlights the importance of family support in fostering resilience, particularly in rural settings where women often juggle multiple roles (Evans et al., 2015; Gyan & Kpoor, 2022).

Ungar's ecological theory emphasizes the role of social networks and supportive environments in fostering resilience (Ungar, 2012). In the case of rural Ghanaian women, the study found that familial support acts as a protective factor, enabling them to balance their domestic responsibilities with their public roles in community development. This dynamic is particularly important in rural settings, where women often face a "double burden" of unpaid labor at home and leadership roles in community projects (Miller & Smith, 2017). The study revealed that family support, particularly in childcare and household duties, allows women to pursue leadership opportunities and contribute to the resilience of their communities.

However, the study also highlighted the complexity of familial support, with some participants reporting ambivalence or discouragement from family members regarding their community involvement. This reflects the broader societal expectations that rural women must navigate—balancing traditional gender roles with their expanding public responsibilities. Feminist scholars have argued that these conflicting expectations can undermine women's resilience, particularly when they are not fully supported in their efforts to engage in community leadership (Kotiswaran, 2023). Despite these challenges, the support these women received from their families—whether emotional, practical, or financial—was essential in enhancing their resilience and enabling them to contribute to the development of their communities.

Moreover, the study found that the active participation of women in rural communities in community development initiatives significantly enhances their resilience in Ghana. By engaging in initiatives such as building clinics, organizing communal labor, and advocating for better healthcare, these women acquire practical skills and leadership abilities that enable them to adapt to changing circumstances. These activities provide women with the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to their communities, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment. This finding aligns with existing research that suggests active involvement in community projects fosters a sense of purpose and belonging, which is critical for resilience-building (Agyemang et al., 2016; Gundewar & Chin, 2020).

According to Ungar's ecological theory, participation in community activities provides women with access to the social networks and resources necessary to navigate challenges and adapt to changing circumstances (Ungar, 2012). In rural Ghana, where women are increasingly taking on leadership roles in education, health, and environmental sustainability, their active engagement in community development initiatives has a profound impact on their individual resilience and the collective resilience of their communities as emphasized by K. Adom and Asare-Yeboah (2016). This is supported by the literature, which highlights how women's participation in community projects enhances their social capital and promotes collective action, both of which are essential for fostering long-term resilience (Stewart et al., 2015; Yambah et al., 2022).

By participating in community development, women also challenge traditional gender roles and assert their agency in public spaces. This shift not only empowers them individually but also contributes to the broader goal of gender equality in rural communities as noted by Asitik and Abu (2020). The findings suggest that through their involvement in community initiatives, women in rural Ghana are redefining their roles and actively contributing to the resilience-building efforts that are vital for sustainable community development.

In addition, the study highlighted the importance of collective social support and communal life in enhancing the resilience of rural women. Ghanaian culture places a strong emphasis on communal life, and this sense of community was evident in the women's participation in development activities. Research supports the idea that social networks and communal engagement are crucial for resilience-building, particularly in rural settings where resources are often limited (Agyemang et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2015).

Women in the study reported that their involvement in community activities provided them with practical and emotional support, helping them navigate the challenges they faced. This finding is consistent with Ungar's ecological theory, which emphasizes the role of social structures in providing access to the resources that sustain well-being (Beery, 2019). By participating in communal labor and other community projects, women in rural Ghana were able to build strong social bonds, which in turn reinforced their resilience. The literature indicates that collective support and solidarity are essential for overcoming socio-economic challenges, as they provide a sense of shared responsibility and mutual assistance (Wemakor, 2019).

In support of this, feminist scholars argue that collective action is central to challenging the power dynamics that have historically marginalized women in rural communities in Ghana (Lambrecht, 2016). The study's findings suggest that women's participation in community development not only enhances their individual resilience but also strengthens the resilience of the entire community. By working together and supporting one another, rural women in Ghana can pool resources, share knowledge, and collectively address the challenges they face.



Finally, the study found that emotional fulfillment and a strong sense of community belonging were critical factors in enhancing the resilience of rural women. Participants reported that feeling accepted and integrated within their communities provided them with a sense of emotional security and satisfaction, which bolstered their ability to cope with adversity. This finding is supported by research in community psychology, which highlights the importance of belonging and social connectedness for resilience-building (Ong et al., 2018).

Ungar's ecological theory underscores that resilience is fostered not only through individual traits but also through meaningful connections within one's social environment (Ungar, 2012). The study revealed that women who felt a strong sense of belonging were more likely to participate in local development initiatives and contribute to the collective well-being of their communities. This sense of belonging also provided women with the emotional strength needed to navigate the socio-economic challenges they faced in rural Ghana as emphasized by Adu et al. (2018) and Budu (2020).

In addition to emotional support, the literature suggests that community belonging fosters social capital, which is essential for resilience-building in rural settings (Adataro et al., 2020). Women who feel connected to their communities are more likely to engage in community projects, advocate for social change, and take on leadership roles. This emotional connection not only enhances their resilience but also contributes to the overall resilience of the community, as women play a central role in fostering collective well-being.

## 7. Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of fostering resilience among women in rural Ghana by adopting an "inside-out" approach that emphasizes intrinsic capacities over external interventions. Through the lens of Ungar's ecological theory of resilience, the research illustrates how personal agency, familial and communal support, cultural values, and active participation in community development work together to enable these women to navigate adversity and contribute to the well-being of their communities. This perspective challenges traditional views that rely heavily on external aid and interventions, instead focusing on the dynamic interplay between individual strengths and the supportive social and cultural ecosystems within which these women operate.

The study uncovered key factors, such as the desire to secure a better future for their children, familial and communal support, and active participation in community development, which drive the resilience of these women. One of the key practical implications of this study is the need for development initiatives to adopt community-driven, gender-sensitive strategies that recognize and enhance the existing strengths of rural women. Policymakers and development practitioners should move beyond a deficit model of resilience that views these women as passive recipients of aid. Instead, they should engage women as active participants and leaders in development efforts, leveraging their deep-rooted community ties, knowledge of local challenges, and intrinsic motivation to improve their families' futures. By incorporating local knowledge, cultural practices, and the strong social networks that already exist within these communities, development programs can be more sustainable and effective in addressing both immediate needs and long-term goals.

Moreover, collective and social support networks are fundamental to the resilience of these women. Development programs should aim to strengthen these networks, fostering greater community participation and collaboration. By promoting collective action and enhancing women's roles in decision-making and

leadership, communities can not only become more resilient but also more equitable, as women's voices and contributions are recognized and amplified.

In terms of long-term impact, this study suggests that future research and development projects should examine how external interventions can complement, rather than overshadow, the intrinsic resilience-building mechanisms that exist within these communities. Specifically, there is a need to explore how systemic changes such as climate adaptation, economic shifts, or political reforms can align with and reinforce the inherent strengths of rural women. Understanding how these women's resilience evolves in response to both external pressures and internal resources will be crucial for designing interventions that are both culturally appropriate and capable of driving sustainable development.

Ultimately, the findings of this study offer valuable insights not only for academic research but also for the practical design of community development and gender equality initiatives. By shifting the focus from external aid to empowering women through their own capacities and networks, policymakers and practitioners can create more sustainable and impactful solutions. Recognizing the complex social, cultural, and familial dynamics at play, and incorporating them into development strategies, will be key to ensuring that women in rural Ghana and similar contexts can continue to build resilience and drive positive change within their communities.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the confidentiality agreement we had with the participants.

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