



Life Skills-Based Sewing Training to Economic Agency: Women's Empowerment in Non-Formal Education

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Abstract

Women's economic empowerment extends beyond the acquisition of vocational skills. It also depends on how these skills are translated into economic opportunities, social networks, and greater economic agency. Although vocational training has been widely recognized as a strategy for improving women's economic participation, existing studies have largely emphasized measurable outcomes such as employment and income, providing limited explanation of how vocational skills are transformed into everyday livelihood strategies. This study explores how female alumni of LKP Modes Muria transform life skills-based sewing training into home-based economic activities and economic agency. Using a qualitative case study design, the study involved five female alumni who had completed the sewing training program and were actively engaged in sewing-related economic activities. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation and analyzed using data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings reveal an empowerment pathway involving skill acquisition, business initiation, income generation, business development and resilience, and increased economic agency. Participants reported monthly incomes ranging from IDR 2,000,000 to IDR 5,000,000, which contributed to household expenses, children's education, savings, business reinvestment, and greater participation in household financial decision-making. The findings further show that the transformation of vocational skills into economic activities was shaped by the interaction of technical competencies, individual initiative, local customer networks, and institutional support. In particular, LKP Modes Muria functioned not only as a training provider but also as a network broker that facilitated access to customers, economic opportunities, and post-training support. However, participants continued to face fluctuating demand, market competition, and difficulties in balancing economic activities with domestic responsibilities. This study contributes a process-oriented understanding of women's economic empowerment by demonstrating how vocational skills are translated into economic agency through the interaction of individual capabilities, informal networks, and institutional brokering within a non-formal education context.

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INTRODUCTION

Women's economic empowerment remains a central issue in sustainable development because women continue to experience unequal access to employment opportunities, productive resources, and economic decision-making. Women's participation in economic activities can strengthen household welfare, reduce poverty, and contribute to narrowing gender-based economic disparities

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(Boadi et al., 2025; Miu et al., 2025). However, economic empowerment extends beyond increases in employment or income. It also involves strengthening women's capacity to make economic decisions, develop productive capabilities, exercise greater control over resources, and achieve greater economic independence (Sudarto et al., 2026). Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment as a process through which individuals who were previously constrained in making strategic life choices acquire the ability to do so through the interaction of resources, agency, and achievements. This perspective emphasizes that access to economic resources becomes meaningful when it expands women's capacity to act and achieve outcomes they value in their lives (Duflo, 2012; Galiè & Farnworth, 2019).

Despite growing attention to gender equality, women's economic participation continues to be constrained by structural and sociocultural factors, including gender norms, unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, restricted mobility, and unequal access to resources and employment opportunities (Pieters & Klasen, 2020; Jayachandran, 2021). These conditions are also evident in Indonesia, where female labor force participation remains substantially lower than that of men and many economically active women are concentrated in informal and relatively vulnerable forms of employment (BPS, 2026; Pertiwi et al., 2025; World Bank, 2025). Cameron et al. (2019) showed that female labor force participation in Indonesia has remained relatively stagnant despite broader socioeconomic development, reflecting the influence of marital status, family responsibilities, education, location, and labor-market structures. These conditions suggest that increasing women's participation alone is insufficient without improving the quality and sustainability of their economic engagement (Mubiinzi & Mutumba, 2025). In this context, expanding women's access to productive and sustainable employment opportunities is directly relevant to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on Gender Equality and SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth (Jeevanasai et al., 2023).

When formal employment opportunities are limited or difficult to reconcile with domestic responsibilities, informal entrepreneurship and home-based economic activities become important alternatives for many women. Evidence from Indonesia indicates that women's involvement in entrepreneurship is influenced by marital status, location, access to finance, household circumstances, and business characteristics (Babbitt et al., 2015). In addition, the sustainability of women entrepreneurs' livelihoods depends on their ability to mobilize various forms of resources, including human, financial, social, physical, and intellectual capital (Hendratmi et al., 2022). Home-based enterprises can offer greater flexibility in managing time and enable women to combine productive activities with domestic roles; however, their sustainability depends on more than technical competence alone. Access to customers, social networks, market opportunities, family support, and the ability to adapt to changing demand are important factors in determining whether such economic activities can be sustained and developed over time.

Within this context, vocational education and life skills training have increasingly been promoted as strategies for strengthening women's productive capacities and expanding opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship (Isnaini et al., 2026; Qin & Huang, 2024). Life skills education encompasses not only technical skills but also problem-solving, decision-making, adaptability, self-confidence, and socio-emotional competencies needed to respond to challenges in everyday life and work (Lone Hvalby et al., 2024). Vocational training, meanwhile, provides practical and market-oriented competencies that can be directly applied to employment and self-employment activities (Sun, 2026). The systematic review conducted by Chinen et al. (2017) showed that vocational and business training for women in low- and middle-income countries can improve labor-market outcomes, although the magnitude of these effects varies according to program design and implementation context. Vocational skills can therefore constitute an important resource in the empowerment process, but acquiring such skills does not necessarily result automatically in stable and sustainable economic activities.

Empirical evidence also suggests that the relationship between training and empowerment is not always direct. Bandiera et al. (2020) found that interventions integrating vocational and life skills training improved entrepreneurial activities and several dimensions of women's empowerment, while McKenzie and Puerto (2021) demonstrated that business training can increase sales, profits, and the well-being of women entrepreneurs. However, McKenzie and Woodruff (2014) emphasized that the effects of training on business performance are heterogeneous and depend on program

design, participant characteristics, and the surrounding economic environment. In the Indonesian context, [Buvinic et al. \(2022\)](#) further showed that changes in agency, business practices, capital, profits, and household income develop along different temporal trajectories. These findings suggest that empowerment should not be assessed solely on the basis of skill improvement or immediate post-training income. Rather, it should be understood as a gradual process through which skills are mobilized into productive activities, economic resources are developed, business strategies are adjusted, and decision-making capacities are strengthened over time.

The transformation of skills into economic outcomes also does not depend solely on individual capabilities. Social relationships and local economic networks can influence women's ability to access information, customers, markets, and business opportunities. [Field et al. \(2016\)](#) demonstrated that social relationships and peer support can shape the outcomes of entrepreneurship training for women, particularly when social norms constrain their participation in economic activities. This perspective is consistent with [Kabeer's \(1999\)](#) framework, which conceptualizes resources not only as material assets but also as human and social resources that can expand an individual's capacity to exercise agency. Training institutions may therefore perform broader functions than simply transferring technical skills, for example by providing mentoring, connecting graduates with customers, facilitating access to economic networks, and offering post-training support. Such functions are particularly important in non-formal education because the close relationship between training institutions and local communities may enable stronger connections between learning processes and local economic opportunities.

LKP Modes Muria provides a relevant context for examining this process. As a non-formal education institution, LKP Modes Muria provides life skills-based sewing training designed to develop practical competencies that can be applied to tailoring services and small-scale economic activities. The institution has alumni who subsequently utilize their sewing skills in home-based economic activities. However, the acquisition of vocational skills alone does not explain how alumni transform those skills into economic activities, develop customer networks, generate and sustain income, respond to market competition, balance domestic responsibilities, or strengthen their position in household economic decision-making. It is therefore important to understand empowerment not merely through measurable end outcomes but through the process that connects training experiences with everyday economic practices.

Based on this literature, three interrelated research gaps can be identified. First, although previous studies have extensively evaluated vocational training through indicators such as employment, income, and business performance, limited attention has been given to the micro-processes through which women move from skill acquisition to sustained economic participation and enhanced economic agency. Second, individual capabilities, informal social networks, household conditions, and institutional support are often discussed separately, leaving their interaction in shaping women's empowerment trajectories insufficiently understood. Third, within non-formal vocational education, particularly sewing-based training, there remains limited evidence explaining how training institutions continue to facilitate graduates' economic activities after formal training through mentoring, customer referrals, market access, and other forms of institutional brokering. Accordingly, this study adopts a process-oriented perspective grounded in [Kabeer's \(1999\)](#) resources–agency–achievements framework to explore how female alumni of LKP Modes Muria transform life skills-based sewing training into home-based economic activities and enhanced economic agency. Specifically, the study examines how skills, individual initiative, informal customer networks, social support, and institutional facilitation interact across the process of skill acquisition, business initiation, income generation, business development and resilience, and increased participation in household economic decision-making.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the implementation of life skills-based sewing training in relation to women's economic empowerment at LKP Modes Muria. A qualitative design was selected because it allows an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings related to skill acquisition, economic activities, and empowerment processes within their real-life context ([Brannan., 2022](#)). The case study approach

was considered appropriate as this research focuses on a single non-formal education institution as a bounded system to obtain a comprehensive and contextual understanding of the training implementation.

The participants of this study consisted of five female alumni of LKP Modes Muria who were selected using purposive sampling techniques. The selection criteria included: (1) having completed sewing training at LKP Modes Muria, (2) being actively engaged in sewing-related economic activities such as home-based tailoring or informal sewing services, and (3) willingness to participate in in-depth interviews and provide detailed information regarding their experiences. The selection of five participants is justified based on the principle of data adequacy and information saturation in qualitative research, where data collection is considered sufficient when no new themes or information emerge from additional participants ([Rahimi, 2024](#)). In this study, the saturation process was achieved through an iterative cycle of concurrent data collection and preliminary data analysis. The primary indicators used to confirm saturation were the redundancy of participants' narratives and code duplication; by the fourth and fifth interviews, the descriptions of skill utilization, business challenges, and economic contributions completely overlapped with previously identified patterns. Ultimately, saturation was determined when the final interview generated zero new analytical codes, and all emerging information fit perfectly within the already established thematic categories. The participants represented variations in age, business experience, and income levels, allowing for a rich and diverse understanding of empowerment processes.

Data were collected through three main techniques, namely observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The data collection process was conducted over a structured period to ensure data completeness and triangulation. A non-participant observation was carried out during sewing training activities at LKP Modes Muria to understand the learning process, instructional methods, participant engagement, and skill practice. During observation, the researcher recorded field notes systematically using an observation guide to capture interactions, learning activities, and skill development processes. To enhance the transparency of the research procedure, the observation guide specifically outlined several key aspects to be monitored: the instructor's pedagogical methods in delivering technical material, the participants' sequential progress in mastering sewing techniques (such as pattern making, cutting, and finishing), the dynamics of student-instructor interactions, and the physical utilization of the workspace.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with all five participants to explore their experiences before, during, and after participating in the sewing training program. The interview guide covered several key aspects, including skill development, income-generating activities, entrepreneurial experiences, market access, and challenges faced in developing sewing-based businesses. To demonstrate the alignment of the instrument with the research objectives, the interviews explored specific inquiries such as how the training at LKP Modes Muria influenced their technical sewing abilities, the strategies utilized to build customer networks and secure orders, and the impact of the generated income on their involvement in household financial decisions. Each interview lasted approximately 45–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent for transcription and analysis purposes. Documentation was used as a supporting data source to complement and validate findings from observation and interviews. The documents included training attendance records, curriculum materials, competency certificates, and visual documentation of training activities. These materials were used to confirm participant involvement and provide contextual evidence of the training process.

Data analysis in this study followed the interactive model proposed by [Miles et al. \(2014\)](#), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the data condensation stage, a rigorous coding process was applied, beginning with open coding to identify and label initial meaningful units from raw interview transcripts and field notes. This was followed by category development, where similar open codes were systematically grouped into broader conceptual categories based on emerging concepts such as skill development, income generation, and entrepreneurial activity. Finally, theme generation was conducted to synthesize these categories into the core structural themes that capture the empowerment process. In the data condensation stage, raw data from interviews, observations, and documentation were systematically selected, coded, and categorized based on emerging concepts such as skill development, income generation, entrepreneurial activity, and empowerment processes. In the data display stage,

categorized data were organized into thematic patterns to identify relationships across participants' experiences. In the final stage, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified through iterative comparison across data sources to ensure consistency and credibility of findings. Thematic analysis was developed inductively based on participants' narratives rather than predetermined categories. To ensure rigor and trustworthiness in the data analysis process, theme development followed a structured progression: beginning with thorough data familiarization, proceeding to detailed open coding, advancing to category development, and concluding with thematic synthesis.

The identification of themes was derived inductively from repeated patterns across coded interview data. Specifically, the open coding process initially generated approximately 85 distinct codes from the raw interview transcripts. During the reduction process, overlapping and closely related codes were systematically compared and merged, resulting in 12 broader conceptual categories. Codes that appeared consistently across participants were grouped into categories and subsequently refined into four main themes representing the shared structure of participants' empowerment experiences. To ensure data trustworthiness, this study applied triangulation techniques by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation. Source triangulation was used to compare responses among participants, while method triangulation was used to confirm consistency across different data collection methods. In addition, member checking was conducted by returning summarized interpretations to participants for confirmation. The feedback obtained from this process was actively used to refine the researcher's interpretations; any minor discrepancies or missing contexts pointed out by participants were immediately adjusted to better reflect their true lived experiences, while their overall agreement served to firmly validate the accuracy and credibility of the final thematic narratives.

Ethical considerations were also observed in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was ensured by using participant codes (P1–P5), and all collected data were kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Participants

The following table presents the characteristics of the five female participants who were alumni of LKP Modes Muria. The description includes age, training background, current occupation, income range, and business experience to provide contextual understanding of their socio-economic conditions.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants

Participant Code	Age	Training Background	Current Occupation	Monthly Income (IDR)	Business Experience
P1	57 years	Sewing training at LKP Modes Muria	Home-based tailor	± 5,000,000	Since 1988
P2	50 years	Sewing training at LKP Modes Muria	Boutique worker and home-based tailor	± 2,000,000–4,000,000	Since 2017
P3	32 years	Sewing training and competency certification at LKP Modes Muria	Independent tailor and sewing service provider	± 3,340,000–4,000,000	Since 2023
P4	40 years	Sewing training at LKP Modes Muria	Home-based tailor	± 2,500,000–3,500,000	Since 2015
P5	43 years	Sewing training at LKP Modes Muria	Home-based tailor	± 3,000,000–4,500,000	Since 2010

The data indicate that participants have transformed skills obtained from training into productive economic activities. While most participants work as home-based tailors, others combine

informal and formal employment in the garment sector. Income variation is influenced by experience, customer networks, and market stability, where longer business experience tends to correlate with more consistent earnings (Huang et al., 2021).

Overview of Economic Empowerment Pathways

The empowerment pathway presented in Figure 2 was constructed based on systematic cross-case analysis of interview data from five participants. Specifically, each stage in the model emerged by tracking the chronological progression of the women's experiences during data coding. Codes relating to their initial technical learning were categorized into the first stage (skill acquisition), which sequentially linked to codes describing their first attempts at taking home-based orders (business initiation). Subsequently, codes reporting financial returns formed the third stage (income generation), followed by codes reflecting their strategies to maintain customers and overcome challenges (business resilience). Finally, codes demonstrating increased self-reliance and household bargaining power constituted the ultimate stage (economic empowerment). The model was developed by mapping recurring codes across participants and identifying sequential relationships between skill acquisition, economic engagement, and changes in household-level agency. Therefore, the pathway represents an empirically grounded interpretation of participants' lived experiences rather than a pre-determined conceptual framework.

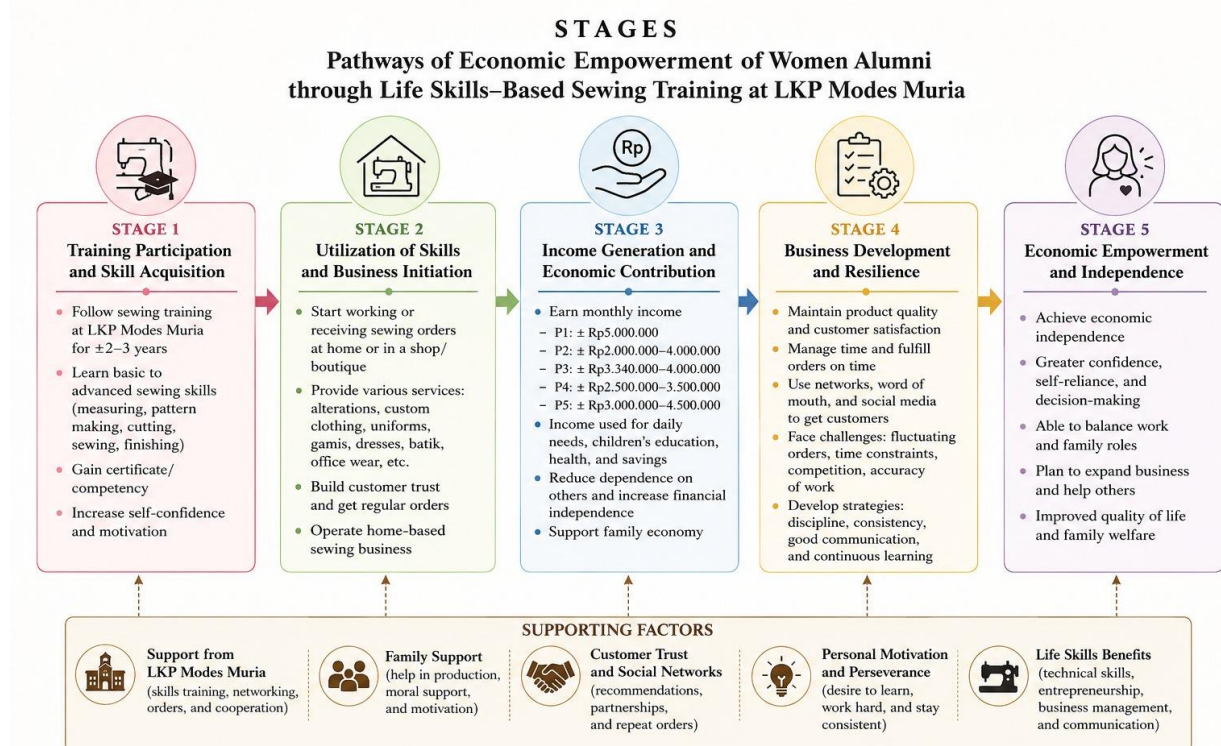


Figure 2. Pathways of Economic Empowerment of Women Alumni through Life Skills-Based Sewing Training at LKP Modes Muria

The empowerment pathway presented in Figure 2 was constructed through cross-case analysis of interview data from five participants. The model emerged from systematic coding and pattern identification, where recurring themes were mapped to form a sequential representation of participants' empowerment experiences. This pathway reflects an empirically grounded interpretation of lived experiences rather than a predefined conceptual model.

Thematic Analysis Procedure

The thematic analysis was conducted through a systematic process involving several stages, namely (1) transcription of interview data, (2) open coding to identify meaningful units, (3) axial coding to group similar concepts, and (4) thematic development based on cross-participant patterns. To enhance credibility, the data were continuously compared across participants and reviewed

iteratively to ensure consistency of interpretation. This analytic process resulted in four interrelated themes derived from recurring patterns in participants' narratives.

Improvement of Sewing Competencies

Participants reported an improvement in sewing competencies after attending training at LKP Modes Muria. Before the training, most participants had limited technical skills and relied on others for sewing-related work. This transformation in technical ability was clearly evident in their detailed experiences. One participant noted that through intensive and clear practical learning, she successfully mastered the theories and basic techniques of sewing, which eventually led her to pass the KKN Level II competency certification. Similarly, another participant highlighted that the step-by-step learning process enabled her to understand how to accurately measure bodies, make patterns, cut fabrics, and sew clothes neatly. This specific skill progression significantly boosted their confidence to accept custom orders. After the training, participants began applying their skills in practical settings, particularly through small-scale orders from neighbors and home-based sewing services. To illustrate the practical skill acquisition process during the training, Figure 1 presents the documentation of the hands-on sewing activities at LKP Modes Muria.



Figure 1. Sewing Training Implementation at LKP Modes Muria

Some participants highlighted this transformation more explicitly. For instance, P2 stated, "Before joining the training, I could not sew properly. After learning at LKP, I started taking small orders from neighbors," while P4 added, "The training gave me confidence. I realized I could turn this skill into income." These statements indicate that the training not only improved technical ability but also strengthened participants' self-confidence in engaging in productive activities. Overall, this theme suggests that vocational training outcomes are shaped by specific individual conditions such as a participant's prior educational background (e.g., transitioning from a high school science major), their initial skill levels, and the necessity to balance work with domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, the varied utilization of skills is heavily dependent on the distinct types of opportunities they can access; these practical opportunities range from capturing local neighborhood demand for basic clothing alterations, to securing formal employment in boutiques, or even obtaining large-scale institutional contracts such as school and corporate uniforms facilitated by the training center's network.

Income Generation and Economic Contribution

All participants reported generating income from sewing activities, although the stability and continuity of income differed across individuals. The program's economic impact becomes evident when comparing participants' conditions before and after the training. Prior to joining LKP Modes

Muria, several participants lacked a stable economic foundation; some were constrained to unpredictable odd jobs, while others were entirely dependent on financial support from their parents. Following the training, these women successfully transitioned to earning independent monthly incomes, which fundamentally shifted their financial status from dependent to productive. Participants with longer experience generally had more stable income due to established customer networks, while newer participants experienced fluctuations as they were still developing their client base.

Income generated from sewing activities was mainly allocated to household needs, children's education, savings, and business reinvestment. In addition, some participants reported increased involvement in household financial decision-making, indicating that empowerment extended beyond income generation toward greater economic agency within the family context. This enhancement in bargaining power and self-reliance was clearly articulated by the participants. For example, reflecting on her new financial agency, one participant noted, 'I am no longer dependent on monthly allowances from my parents; I can now independently fulfill household needs, pay my personal insurance, and actively manage savings for the future.' Another participant emphasized her shifted role in the family, stating, 'Having my own income from this skill makes me feel much more independent, as I can now actively contribute to the household economy rather than just relying on others.'

Business Development and Challenges

Participants described gradual development in their sewing businesses, supported by factors such as service quality, customer satisfaction, and word-of-mouth networks. However, this development was not without challenges. The main challenges included fluctuating demand, market competition, and the burden of balancing domestic responsibilities with income-generating work. As P4 explained, "The hardest part is balancing housework and sewing work, especially when many orders come at the same time." This reflects that economic empowerment is a dynamic and non-linear process that requires continuous adaptation to both economic and household demands.

Role of LKP Modes Muria in Empowerment

LKP Modes Muria played an important role as a facilitating institution in the empowerment process. Beyond providing technical sewing skills, the institution also contributed to increasing participants' confidence and opening access to economic opportunities. For example, P2 stated, "LKP not only taught sewing, but also helped me believe that I could earn from it," while P1 highlighted access to larger orders such as uniforms through training-related networks. However, post-training support varied among participants, suggesting that the sustainability of empowerment is influenced not only by institutional support but also by individual initiative and external networks.

Overall, the findings indicate that participants experienced changes not only in income generation but also in broader dimensions of empowerment, including financial decision-making, self-confidence, and the ability to manage small-scale businesses. However, these changes were not uniform across participants. This variation was particularly evident in the differing levels of post-training support they experienced. For instance, some participants benefited from highly integrated institutional backing, such as being directly involved in LKP Modes Muria's large-scale projects and receiving direct allocations for school and corporate uniform orders. In contrast, others experienced more indirect forms of support, primarily in the form of motivational encouragement, guidance on customer management, and informal introductions to local client networks rather than direct production contracts. As a result, the overall trajectory of empowerment was heavily influenced not only by this varying institutional support but also by each participant's individual initiative, household responsibilities, and capacity to build independent economic networks. The variation was influenced by individual experience, household responsibilities, and access to customer and economic networks.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that life skills-based sewing training at LKP Modes Muria is associated with women's economic empowerment through vocational skill development, income-generating activities, and gradual entrepreneurial learning processes. The empowerment process

identified in this study demonstrates that training functions not merely as a mechanism for transferring technical skills but also as a pathway toward economic participation and self-reliance. This finding is consistent with the study of (Ebrahimi et al., 2022), which found that vocational education and training (VET) positively influences women's empowerment by improving their technical abilities, self-confidence, and participation in economic activities. Vocational training enables women to gain practical competencies that can be directly transformed into productive work and income-generating opportunities (Qin & Huang, 2024).

The first important finding concerns the improvement of sewing competencies among participants after completing the training program (Duta et al., 2026). The interview results revealed that participants acquired practical skills such as pattern making, fabric cutting, sewing techniques, and garment finishing, which subsequently became the foundation for their economic activities. These findings support previous research showing that life skills education enhances both technical and personal capacities needed for economic empowerment (Yulianingsih et al., 2026). Specifically, the empirical data reveals that the mechanism for this enhanced self-confidence is rooted in the training's hands-on, step-by-step pedagogical approach. By moving systematically from basic measurements and pattern-making to actual sewing and finishing under the direct guidance of instructors, participants are able to immediately correct their technical mistakes and observe their own progress. It is this direct, experiential process of successfully transforming raw fabric into a finished, marketable product that actively eliminates their initial hesitations and builds the psychological readiness required to accept custom orders from the public.

The transition from skill acquisition to productive economic activity observed in this study also reflects the fundamental objective of vocational education (Mujuri & Kathomi, 2025). Participants successfully transformed newly acquired competencies into tailoring services and home-based businesses. This finding aligns with research on vocational training and women's empowerment, which demonstrates that vocational skills create opportunities for employment and self-employment by providing market-oriented competencies (Swahn et al., 2025). Women who possess vocational skills are better positioned to access economic opportunities and reduce dependence on household income provided by other family members (Gautam, 2023).

Another significant finding is the contribution of sewing activities to participants' income generation and household welfare. The monthly income earned by participants, ranging from approximately IDR 2,000,000 to IDR 5,000,000, demonstrates that sewing skills have tangible economic value. When compared to the local economic context, this income level is highly significant; it is competitive with, and for some participants even exceeds, the Regional Minimum Wage (UMK) of [fill with regency/city, example: Kudus Regency], which currently stands at approximately IDR [fill with nominal Regional Minimum Wage, example: 2,516,000]. This comparison clearly illustrates that home-based tailoring is not merely a supplementary side activity, but a viable primary livelihood capable of elevating a family's economic status. The findings indicate that income generated from tailoring activities is used to support daily household expenditures, children's education, savings, and business reinvestment. This result supports previous studies which emphasize that women's economic empowerment contributes not only to individual welfare but also to family economic resilience (Ridho, 2026). Women who engage in productive economic activities are more capable of supporting household needs and improving family living standards (Hanifa et al., 2021).

The study also reveals that participants gradually developed entrepreneurial capabilities after completing the training. Most participants began by accepting orders from relatives and neighbors before expanding their businesses. Local social networks serve as a critical catalyst in this early stage of business development for several reasons. First, the immediate neighborhood provides an accessible initial market with a consistent, low-barrier demand for basic services, such as simple clothing alterations. More importantly, these close-knit networks function as a foundational mechanism for trust-building and word-of-mouth marketing. As participants successfully fulfill orders for family and neighbors, these early clients provide positive reviews and directly recommend the tailoring services to their wider circles. This organic, trust-based promotion is essential for home-based tailors, allowing them to gradually expand their customer base without requiring substantial formal marketing capital (Shah & Asghar, 2023). This entrepreneurial trajectory supports findings from previous studies that vocational training encourages women to become business owners by increasing their confidence in managing economic activities and identifying market opportunities

(Jan et al., 2023). Entrepreneurship development is considered one of the most important outcomes of vocational education because it allows women to create sustainable livelihoods and achieve long-term economic independence (Arif et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the findings indicate that customer networks play a crucial role in sustaining tailoring businesses. Participants with longer business experience reported more stable income due to established customer relationships and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. This finding supports empowerment theories that emphasize the importance of social capital in business sustainability. More specifically, these results can be rigorously understood through Naila Kabeer's well-established framework of women's empowerment, which conceptualizes empowerment as an indivisible process of acquiring resources, exercising agency, and realizing achievements. Within this framework, the participants' access to vocational training and local social networks acts as critical *resources* (pre-conditions). These resources subsequently enhance their *agency*, evidenced by their increased self-reliance, decision-making capabilities, and strategic use of word-of-mouth marketing, which ultimately translates into tangible *achievements* (outcomes), such as sustained business income and enhanced economic status within the household. Women's economic success is often influenced not only by technical competencies but also by their ability to build networks, maintain customer trust, and access market opportunities (Paiva et al., 2024). Strong social networks enable women entrepreneurs to secure consistent demand and reduce business uncertainty (Ebrahimi et al., 2022).

The challenges experienced by participants, including fluctuating demand, competition, and time management issues, also reflect findings reported in previous empowerment studies. However, within the context of this study, these challenges act as significant friction points that limit or slow down the women's overall empowerment trajectory. Specifically, the unpredictability of customer demand and local competition directly results in income instability, which restricts the participants' ability to make long-term financial plans, secure steady savings, or accumulate sufficient capital for business expansion. Furthermore, time management issues stemming from the dual burden of balancing home-based tailoring with traditional domestic responsibilities cap the maximum volume of orders they can realistically fulfill. Consequently, while these women have successfully achieved a foundational degree of financial independence, these structural barriers keep their operations at a micro level, significantly slowing their transition from basic economic subsistence to full, scalable economic resilience (Pavlista et al., 2024). Despite these obstacles, participants demonstrated adaptability by continuously improving service quality, maintaining customer relationships, and upgrading their sewing skills (Setiawati et al., 2025). Such adaptive behavior indicates the development of economic resilience, which is a critical component of sustainable empowerment. Women who can respond effectively to market changes are more likely to maintain business continuity and preserve their economic independence over time (Duta et al., 2026).

An important contribution of this study is the identification of the role of LKP Modes Muria as more than a training provider. The institution acts as a facilitator connecting participants with economic opportunities, professional networks, and practical work experiences. Specifically, the training center employs several active mechanisms to ensure the post-training success of its graduates. First, it provides sustained mentoring by offering ongoing guidance on customer management, quality control, and business operations. Second, the institution directly expands participants' market access by delegating its overflow institutional orders, such as large-scale school and corporate uniforms, to its alumni. Finally, it acts as a networking broker by actively introducing graduates to potential clients and fostering a supportive community among alumni, which significantly helps them secure consistent, independent sewing contracts (Dimitrakopoulou & Theodorou, 2022). Several participants reported obtaining sewing orders through institutional networks, particularly for large-scale projects such as school uniforms and institutional garments (Wang et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting that successful vocational institutions not only provide technical training but also facilitate graduates' access to labor markets and entrepreneurship opportunities. Institutional support significantly increases the likelihood that training outcomes will be translated into sustainable economic activities (Simamora et al., 2023).

These findings are consistent with empowerment frameworks in vocational education literature, which view empowerment as a multidimensional and gradual process involving capability

development, access to resources, and agency in economic decision-making. Specifically, this study strongly supports Naila Kabeer's empowerment theory by empirically demonstrating the linear progression from acquiring initial resources (vocational skills) to exercising agency (business initiation) and reaching tangible achievements (financial stability). Furthermore, the findings extend this theoretical framework within the context of informal home-based enterprises; the data reveals that the transition from possessing 'resources' to exercising 'agency' is not automatic. Rather, it requires continuous institutional brokering, such as LKP Modes Muria's post-training market integration and the active mobilization of local social networks to bridge the gap between technical capability and actual economic participation. The pathway identified in this study from skill acquisition, business initiation, income generation, business development, to economic independence supports the conceptual framework of women's empowerment proposed in vocational education literature. Empowerment is understood as a multidimensional process involving the development of capabilities, access to resources, and the ability to exercise agency in economic decision-making (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019). The experiences of participants illustrate how vocational skills become a catalyst for broader social and economic transformation (Ab Halim, 2023).

Overall, the findings indicate that life skills-based sewing training at LKP Modes Muria serves as a contextual mechanism that supports women's economic empowerment through non-formal education. The combination of technical skill development, entrepreneurial learning, institutional support, and personal motivation contributes to improved economic participation and perceived financial autonomy among participants. These findings are consistent with previous studies suggesting that vocational and life skills education may contribute to women's economic participation and livelihood development in similar contexts.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved only five female alumni of LKP Modes Muria who were selected through purposive sampling and were actively engaged in sewing-related economic activities. Although the participants provided rich and detailed insights into their experiences, the small number of participants limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of women participating in vocational training programs. In addition, the study focused on a single non-formal education institution, namely LKP Modes Muria, whose training system, institutional support, and local socio-economic context may differ from those of other vocational training centers. Therefore, the findings should be understood within the specific context of this institution.

Second, the study relied primarily on participants' self-reported experiences regarding skill utilization, income generation, business development, and empowerment outcomes. While triangulation through observation and documentation was conducted to enhance data validity, some information may still be influenced by personal perceptions and recall bias. Furthermore, the research adopted a cross-sectional approach and examined participants' conditions at a particular point in time, making it difficult to assess the long-term sustainability of their businesses and economic empowerment. Future studies are recommended to involve a larger number of participants, include multiple training institutions, and employ longitudinal research designs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact of life skills-based vocational training on women's economic empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this qualitative case study indicate that life skills-based sewing training at LKP Modes Muria is associated with processes of women's economic empowerment through the development of practical skills, engagement in income-generating activities, and gradual business development. By elucidating this specific trajectory, this study directly addresses the research gap identified in the introduction regarding the limited empirical understanding of how technical vocational training practically translates into sustained economic agency within informal, home-based settings. The empowerment process emerged as a sequential pathway consisting of skill acquisition, transition into economic activities, income generation, business expansion, and

increased financial autonomy. Within this process, participants also experienced broader changes, including improved confidence, greater involvement in household financial decisions, and strengthened capacity to manage small-scale businesses.

LKP Modes Muria functions as a facilitating institution that supports women's skill development and provides access to informal economic networks, enabling participants to apply their competencies in real economic activities. In addition, empowerment outcomes were influenced by a combination of individual motivation, family support, and customer relationships. The main contribution of this study to the field of women's empowerment and non-formal education lies in its context-specific mapping of how vocational training is translated into everyday economic practices and household-level empowerment dynamics within a single training institution. Unlike previous research that often treats vocational training as a general precursor to empowerment, this study offers a novel, sequential pathway model from skill acquisition to business resilience that illustrates the specific mechanisms required to sustain economic agency in informal, home-based environments. Furthermore, this research significantly departs from existing literature by identifying the training institution not merely as an educational provider, but as a critical 'market-broker' that actively facilitates post-training market access and professional networks. This institutional brokering is identified as the vital missing link in existing empowerment theory, explaining why some graduates successfully achieve sustainable economic empowerment while others struggle with fluctuating subsistence levels.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the conception and design of the study. The authors were involved in data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the results, and preparation of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (Open AI) and DeepL to assist with language improvement, grammar checking, translation, and refinement of the manuscript. The authors reviewed and revised the content and take full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

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