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Review

Empowerment of Rural Women Through Autonomy and Decision-Making

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Abstract

The empowerment of women in rural areas implies that they have power and control over their lives and participate in individual and collective decision-making. Empowerment depends on autonomy or the ability to act independently. The lack or weakness of autonomy is due to traditional gender roles in rural communities, which reinforce norms and expectations that restrict women, limiting their empowerment and ability to make informed and effective decisions. This context fosters the creation of unequal power structures and women's dependence on male figures. This article explores the relationship between autonomy and decision-making capacity in rural women. Through a review using the PRISMA approach, we analysed whether the absence of autonomy limits empowerment and decision-making. A total of 141 records were identified, and after excluding duplicate documents, those with no relation to the population and the purpose of this article, 35 articles with research results were included in this review. The categories addressed were empowerment, autonomy, decision-making and sustainable development, the latter emerging in the reviewed literature.

Keywords: women's empowerment; women's autonomy; women's decision-making; capabilities; rural women

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1. Introduction

Women's empowerment requires a differentiated approach, understood as a process of social transformation that enables women to acquire the skills and power to participate fully in society on an equal footing with men. Regarding power, it is a concept that has been addressed from multiple approaches in the academic literature. From a classical perspective, Weber defined it as the ability to impose one's own will in a social relationship, even against the resistance of others (Weber 1978), being a position of vertical domination and widely debated and criticised by feminist thought; it is linked to the form of power called "power over" under which women are subordinated politically, economically, socially, and culturally. In this same classical current, we find Foucault with a perspective that considers power as a network of relations that flows and is exercised in multiple ways from institutions, in discourses, normalisation of bodies and mechanisms of knowledge–power that configure subjectivities (Foucault 1983).

From a feminist perspective, authors such as Judith Butler and Susan Bordo have analysed how power shapes gender identities and regulates female bodies through discursive and cultural practices (Bordo 2003; Butler 2004). Thus, from this perspective, forms of power have also been analysed both as visible hierarchical relations (e.g., economic or political power) and also as invisible, internalised structures that reproduce gender inequality. Other forms of power have emerged from feminist debates such as "power to" related to women's ability to act, make decisions and transform reality (Sen 1985, 2000; Nussbaum 2012; Kabeer 1999); "power with" associated with women's collective and solidarity action such as women's social movements (Rowlands 1997; Batliwala 2007); "power within" which refers to self-recognition and dignity, self-esteem, autonomy and awakening of consciousness, fundamental to feminist emancipation (Rowlands 1997; Lagarde y De los Ríos 2005; Batliwala 2007); and finally "structural and symbolic power" analysed from intersectional feminism, which shows how power operates structurally (in institutions, religions, laws) and symbolically (in discourses, gender roles, cultural representations) (Bordo 2003; Kabeer 1999; Crenshaw 1991). Along the lines of the various forms of power, integral approaches have also emerged that imply a vision of empowerment as an expansion of power understood in a relational and transformative sense, as power is not only about resisting everyday, silent and indirect practices that reveal discomfort in the face of unequal structures, but about creating new forms of existence that challenge patriarchal norms (Davis 2007). Importantly, power operates in tandem with resistance; women exercise agency even in contexts of profound inequality, through actions that challenge, negotiate and re-signify the dominant social order (Mihelich and Storrs 2003).

For all of the above reasons, the authors of this article focused on two forms of power. On the one hand, "power to" is associated with women's capacity to make decisions and on the other hand, "power within", which refers to autonomy, both of which are fundamental variables for women's emancipation. These two approaches to power were adopted as relational capacity situated in rural contexts, where patriarchal structures exclude women from their resources and also shape their capacity for agency. In these contexts, women's resistance does not seek to overthrow patriarchal power directly, but is integrated into the social fabric (Mihelich and Storrs 2003), whereby women are often constrained by rigid gender norms, patriarchal hierarchies, deploy strategies of partial autonomy, redefine their role in the household, negotiate the use of resources or assert themselves in community spaces without visibly breaking with the status quo and are seen as situated expressions of power and agency, challenging relations of domination. This choice is justified on the grounds that it allows for a more contextualised understanding of how rural women negotiate, resist or internalise the power relations that affect them and how empowerment cannot be separated from autonomy and decision-making.

That is why autonomy and decision-making have been studied in the literature from a human capabilities and development perspective, both of which are influenced by gender and socioeconomic status, which in turn enable us to understand inequalities in women's quality of life and how they can be transformed to achieve their empowerment (Sen 1985, 2000; Nussbaum and Sen 1998; Nussbaum 2012).

The empowerment of rural women—a concept that is much debated and sometimes reduced to development slogans—continues to be an area of tension between discourse and reality. In the literature on gender equality, there is no shortage of diagnoses or good intentions. It is insisted that empowerment involves not only distributing resources but also guaranteeing the ability to make decisions about one's own body, the domestic economy, crops and the use of money and time. In other words, without agency, without decision-making power, there is no empowerment, despite rural credit or training aimed at rural women (Kabeer 1999; Sen 2000).

In rural areas and spaces, this agency faces barriers related to social norms and cultural dynamics (traditions, family roles, community hierarchies), which limit women's autonomy and generally give them less room to manoeuvre, less voice and less say (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (2011)). Lack of economic autonomy is an anchor that prevents rural women from advancing in self-management and the sustainable transformation and development of their communities (Ang and Lai 2023). In rural areas, women face obstacles related to social norms, limited access to resources and gender roles that hinder this autonomy (World Development Report 2012) and also limit their ability to make informed decisions and have control over their lives. However, the key lies in autonomy understood as the ability to act according to one's own desires and convictions, which leads to genuine empowerment (Malhotra and Schuler 2005).

Decision-making is a critical aspect of empowerment and lies at the heart of personal autonomy and the exercise of agency (Cornwall and Edwards 2010). In this regard, Duflo (2012) points out that the empowerment of rural women is not measured in discourse or theoretical constructs, but in real control over resources, time and social ties. In rural areas, where tradition weighs heavily and customs dictate invisible hierarchies, autonomy remains the exception rather than the norm. Families operate under unspoken rules that limit women's freedom of action (Agarwal 1997), a reality that demands structural and cultural changes to make empowerment possible.

Similarly, multiple studies warn that the lack of autonomy hinders empowerment and makes it unfeasible (Deere and León 2001; Chant 2016) for rural women without decision-making capacity, who become passive agents of initiatives or policies that promise much but transform little (Alkire et al. 2013), while other studies highlight the need to build spaces that promote autonomy and fair conditions for decision-making (Quisumbing et al. 2014).

The barriers to the empowerment of rural women do not come only from within their homes or communities, but also from structural marginalisation and external factors that have a profound human impact: public policies that ignore women's autonomy, access to productive resources and real opportunities for training (International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (2009)). Therefore, plans, policies and actions cannot simply include women as beneficiaries but must build with them a new social contract where they have a voice, a vote and a veto, that is, autonomy in the economic, social and symbolic dimensions, as well as the power to speak, to decide and to disagree (Mazhazha-Nyandoro and Sambureni 2022; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2022); Grown et al. 2005).

In view of the above, the following research question was posed: Does empowerment among rural women lacking autonomy contribute to their decision-making capacity? The objective of the study was to analyse whether the lack of autonomy limits the empowerment and decision-making of rural women.

The document is organised as follows: the Section 1, Introduction, identifies the theoretical basis related to the concepts of empowerment, autonomy and decision-making among rural women, the research question and the objective. The Section 2, Methods and Materials, describes the adoption of the literature review (LR) methodology, the sources, the selection of materials included in the review and the results of adopting the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) approach in the social sciences. The Section 3 comprises the analysis of the selected materials, and the Section 4 addresses the discussion that summarises the main findings and identifies directions for future research, as well as the conclusions.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Methodology

The starting point was the definition of the research question: Does empowerment in rural women lacking autonomy contribute to decision-making capacity? Next, the search for existing academic sources began, through a literature review (LR) (Tranfield et al. 2003; Denyer and Tranfield 2009; Snyder 2019). The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) approach and the 2020 guidelines were used to select relevant articles through the process of identification, selection and evaluation of eligibility and inclusion. This is a recognised tool for ensuring transparency, integrity and replicability in reporting reviews, i.e., it provides the available evidence on a specific research question or topic (Page et al. 2021).

The study focused on past and future evidence in the literature in the context of autonomy, empowerment, decision-making by rural women and sustainable development around the world. The filter used for the publication date included the years 2017 to 2023, while the language filter included English and Spanish. Studies conducted on feminism theory, oppression theory, social justice theory, human rights approach and human development approach were excluded. Books, book chapters, conference papers, documentary reviews, letters and systematic reviews were also excluded. The three authors (N.A.-A., C.R.-S. and A.-K.S.-R.) independently reviewed the title and abstract to decide whether articles would be included in this review.

It is important to specify which social spheres of rural women's power were considered, because when analysing empowerment, such power is not exercised in an abstract way, but in social spheres that structure everyday life and gender relations. Sociology and gender studies suggest that women's power is manifested or contested in institutions such as family, education, economy, religion, politics, health, sports or media.

Therefore, in this manuscript, the institutional settings where power is exercised by rural women responded to two criteria: (1) the operationalisation of empowerment and autonomy in the selected empirical studies and (2) the contextual relevance of these settings in the lives of rural women in developing countries. This work did not a priori exclude any domain, but the results indicated that expressions of women's power were mainly located in three interrelated spheres: family and household, rural/productive economy, and community participation.

2.2. Using PRISMA to Select Materials

Studies on empowerment, autonomy and decision-making among rural women are non-existent in Latin America. Using the PRISMA guidelines, three variables and their respective descriptors were defined in the first phase of the research (identification) (Table 1) in order to construct the search equation that was used in four databases.

Table 1. Variables and their descriptors.

Variables	Descriptors
Women empowerment	- Promotion of women - Rural women - Women and the environment
Women's autonomy	- Unpaid work - Equal pay
Women's decision-making	- Women in agriculture

Source: own elaboration.

The descriptors were obtained from the UNBIS Thesaurus belonging to the United Nations Bibliographic Information System, which is fed by the knowledge production of all United Nations agencies: World Bank, ILO, WHO, FAO, IAEA and UNESCO. In the thesaurus, concept 14. Social conditions and the following codes were used: 140100 'Promotion of women'; TE2 1002101 'Equal remuneration', 'unpaid work'; TE2 105646 'Rural women', TE2 107037 'Women and the environment'; TE2 1007038 'Women in agriculture' (United Nations Library 2024).

In constructing the search equation, the logical operators AND (to join variables) and OR (to join descriptors) were used. Table 2 shows the search equations in Spanish and English.

Table 2. Search equations.

In Spanish	In English
("empoderamiento femenino" OR "promoción de la mujer" OR "mujeres rurales" OR "Mujer y medio ambiente") AND ("autonomía femenina" OR "trabajo no remunerado" OR "igualdad de remuneración") AND ("toma de decisiones de la mujer" OR "mujeres en la agricultura")	("Women empowerment" OR "Promotion of women" OR "Rural women" OR "Women and the environment") AND ("Women's autonomy" OR "Unpaid work" OR " Equal pay") AND ("Women's decision-making" OR "Women in agriculture")

Source: own elaboration.

The research materials were collected from four databases. The total number of articles obtained was one hundred and forty-one (141) documents, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Number of records (articles) identified.

Database	English	Spanish	Total *
Web of Science	4	0	4
Scopus	82	1	83
ProQuest	9	1	10
Science Direct	44	0	44
Total	139	2	141

* The search window was the years 2017 to 2023. Source: own elaboration.

Similarly, Figure 1 shows the diagram required by the PRISMA methodology adopted, which relates the number of studies identified, selected, excluded and included in the review.

A total of one hundred and forty-one (141) records were identified, consisting of scientific articles presenting research results. Nine (9) were excluded from the analysis because they were identified as duplicates, resulting in one hundred and thirty-two (132) records that were examined, of which forty-three (43) articles (32.6%) were included and eighty-nine (89) articles (67.4%) were excluded.

Of the eighty-nine (89) articles excluded, seventy-nine (79) were excluded due to their lack of relevance to the objective of this study; they were discarded because they were not related to the objective of this article and did not address the variables under study—women empowerment, autonomy and women's decision-making—and ten (10) were excluded due to their lack of relevance to our target population, i.e., the population studied were women in urban settings.

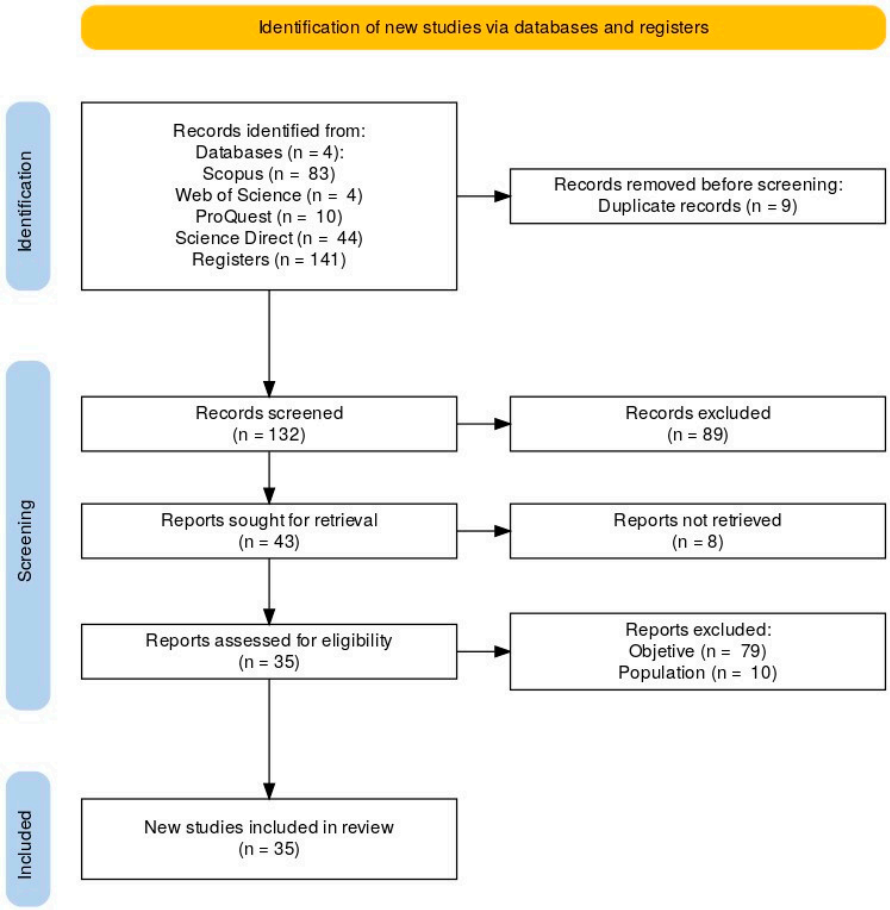

Figure 1. Selection of studies to be included in the review. Source: Own. Retrieved from the Rayyan ai platform.

Subsequently, of the forty-three (43) records included, eight documents were excluded because they were not retrieved, i.e., the full text was not open access. Based on these stages, identification, selection and evaluation of eligibility and inclusion, thirty-five (35) articles were included in this literature review, which were reviewed in depth. In this process, the Rayyan artificial intelligence-assisted collaboration and research platform was used (Haddaway et al. 2022). The Rayyan.ai tool is designed to facilitate literature reviews, especially in medical and academic contexts. This platform allowed us to organise, filter and select relevant studies collaboratively and efficiently, supporting the development of the PRISMA methodology. The features of this tool include importing references, blinding decisions, including, excluding or tagging articles, collaborating as a team, removing duplicates, detecting conflicts, applying search filters and generating the diagram corresponding to the PRISMA methodology.

2.3. Results of the Adoption of PRISMA

Of all the literature examined for this review (132 articles), 100% were scientific articles reporting research results. Table 4 presents the list of the literature reviewed, according to the type of source consulted and the number of articles initially included. The scientific journals consulted that reported two or more articles are identified by name, while the category "Others" at the end of the table includes journals that reported only one scientific article, with the caveat that these are journals related to areas such as development, women's studies and social sciences, among others.

Table 4. Number of items included organised by source.

Source	Items Included
World Development	16
Social Science & Medicine	5
Food Policy	4
GeoJournal	3
Population Research and Policy Review	3
Global Food Security	3
Energy Research & Social Science	3
World Development Perspectives	2
Journal of Biosocial Science	2
Pakistan Journal of Agricultural Sciences	2
Environment, Development and Sustainability	2
Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems	2
Midwifery	2
Land Use Policy	2
International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction	2
Agriculture and Human Values	2
Feminist Economics	2
Journal of Rural Studies	2
Journal of International Development	2
Others	71
Total	132

Source: own elaboration.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the selected articles in relation to the year of publication. It is important to note that the search window covered the years 2017 to 2023. Only one article was published in 2017, and none were found in 2018 and 2019. This indicates a growing interest in studying the autonomy, empowerment and decision-making of rural women over the last four years.

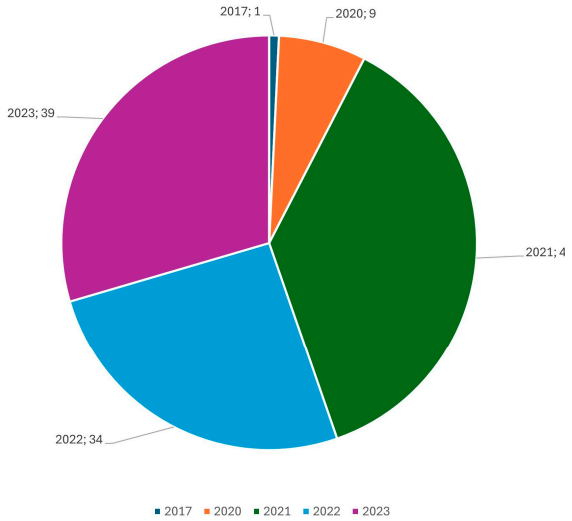

Figure 2. Distribution of selected publications by year of publication. Source: Own. Retrieved from the Rayyan ai platform.

Similarly, Table 5 lists the sources of the thirty-five (35) articles included in this review and the categories addressed in the analysis.

Table 5. Overview of papers included in the literature review.

N°	Author	Title	Year of Publication	Journal	Categories Addressed				
					Rural Women	Women's Empowerment	Autonomy Approach	Decision-Making (Choice Theory)	Sustainable Development
1	Abdu, A.; Marquis, G.S.; Colecraft, E.K.; Dodoo, N.D.; Grimard, F. (Abdu et al. 2022)	The Association of Women's Participation in Farmer-Based Organizations with Female and Male Empowerment and its Implication for Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture Interventions in Rural Ghana	2022	Current Developments in Nutrition	X	X			X
2	Akter, S. (Akter 2021)	Do catastrophic floods change the gender division of labor? Panel data evidence from Pakistan	2021	International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction	X	X		X	
3	Ang, C.W.; Lai, S.L. (Ang and Lai 2023)	Women's Empowerment in Malaysia and Indonesia: The Autonomy of Women in Household Decision-Making	2023	Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities	X	X	X	X	
4	Bhutia, K. W. (Bhutia 2021)	Labour Force Participation Rate in Agricultural and Non-Agricultural Activities in Sikkim with Special Emphasis on Women's Work Participation: Variation Across Districts	2021	International Journal of Applied Science and Engineering	X	X			
5	Bonis-Profumo, G.; Stacey, N.; Brimblecombe, J. (Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021)	Measuring women's empowerment in agriculture, food production, and child and maternal dietary diversity in Timor-Leste	2021	Food Policy	X	X	X	X	
6	Essilfie, G.; Sebu, J.; Annim, S.K.; Asmah, E.E. (Essilfie et al. 2021)	Women's empowerment and household food security in Ghana	2021	International Journal of Social Economics	X	X	X		
7	García-Reyes, Paola; Wiig, Henrik (García-Reyes and Wiig 2020)	Reasons of gender. Gender, household composition and land restitution process in Colombia	2020	Journal of Rural Studies	X		X		
8	Ghasemi, M.; Badsar, M.; Falahati, L.; Karamidehkordi, E. (Ghasemi et al. 2021)	The mediation effect of rural women empowerment between social factors and environment conservation (combination of empowerment and ecofeminist theories)	2021	Environment, Development and Sustainability	X	X	X	X	X
9	Gonzaga, Gretchen L.; Alesna, Wolfreda T.; Cagasan, Editha G. (Gonzaga et al. 2022)	Women's experiences of a livelihood project after Haiyan: A phenomenological study	2022	International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction	X	X			X
10	Haley, Ch.; Marsh, R. (Haley and Marsh 2021)	Income generation and empowerment pathways for rural women of Jagusi Parish, Uganda: A double-sided sword	2021	Social Sciences & Humanities Open	X	X	X	X	

Table 5. *Cont.*

N°	Author	Title	Year of Publication	Journal	Categories Addressed				
					Rural Women	Women's Empowerment	Autonomy Approach	Decision-Making (Choice Theory)	Sustainable Development
11	Ishfaq, S.; Kouser, S. (Ishfaq et al. 2023)	Measurement and Determinants of Rural Women's Empowerment in Pakistan	2023	Global Social Welfare	X	X	X	X	X
12	Islam, F.B.; Sharma, M. (Islam and Sharma 2021)	Gendered dimensions of unpaid activities: An empirical insight into rural Bangladesh households	2021	Sustainability	X	X	X	X	X
13	Islam, F.B.; Sharma, M. (Islam and Sharma 2022)	Socio-economic determinants of women's livelihood time use in rural Bangladesh	2022	GeoJournal	X	X	X	X	
14	Jain, C.; Saxena, D.; Sen, S.; Sanan, D. (Jain et al. 2023)	Women's land ownership in India: Evidence from digital land records	2023	Land Use Policy	X		X	X	
15	Karimli, L.; Lecoutere, E.; Wells, Ch. R.; Ismayilova, L. (Karimli et al. 2021)	More assets, more decision-making power? Mediation model in a cluster-randomized controlled trial evaluating the effect of the graduation program on women's empowerment in Burkina Faso	2021	World Development	X	X	X	X	
16	Mazhazha-Nyandoro, Z.; Sambureni, V. (Mazhazha-Nyandoro and Sambureni 2022)	Cotton farming and the socio-economic status of women in Zimbabwe	2022	Gender & Behaviour	X	X	X	X	X
17	Mechlowitz, K.; Singh, N.; Li, X.; Chen, D.; Yang, Y.; Rabil, A.; Cheraso, A.J.; Ahmed, I.A.; Amin, J.K.; Gebreyes, W.A.; Hassen, J.Y.; Ibrahim, A.M.; Manary, M.J.; Rajashekara, G.; Roba, K.T.; Usmane, I.A.; Havelaar, A.H.; McKune, S.L.; (Mechlowitz et al. 2023)	Women's empowerment and child nutrition in a context of shifting livelihoods in Eastern Oromia, Ethiopia	2023	Frontiers in Nutrition	X	X	X	X	X
18	Nath, T.D.; Athinuwat, D. (Nath and Athinuwat 2021)	Key factors of women empowerment in organic farming	2021	GeoJournal	X	X	X	X	X
19	Newsome, L. (Newsome 2021)	Disrupted gender roles in Australian agriculture: first generation female farmers' construction of farming identity	2021	Agriculture and Human Values	X	X	X	X	X
20	Nhung Pham T.; Kappas, M.; Wyss, D. (Nhung et al. 2020)	Benefits and Constraints of the Agricultural Land Acquisition for Urbanization for Household Gender Equality in Affected Rural Communes: A Case Study in Huong Thuy Town, Thua Thien Hue Province, Vietnam	2020	Land	X	X		X	

Table 5. *Cont.*

N°	Author	Title	Year of Publication	Journal	Categories Addressed				
					Rural Women	Women's Empowerment	Autonomy Approach	Decision-Making (Choice Theory)	Sustainable Development
21	Okonya, J.S.; Mudege, N.N.; Nyaga, J.N.; Jogo, W. (Okonya et al. 2021)	Determinants of Women's Decision-Making Power in Pest and Disease Management: Evidence From Uganda	2021	Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems	X	X	X	X	
22	Ortiz-Rodríguez, J.; Picazzo-Palencia, E. (Ortiz-Rodríguez and Picazzo-Palencia 2022)	Differences in Decision-Making Capacity Among Mexican Women of Different Ages	2022	Population Research and Policy Review	X	X	X	X	
23	Pattnaik, Itishree; Lahiri-Dutt, Kuntala (Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020)	What determines women's agricultural participation? A comparative study of landholding households in rural India	2020	Journal of Rural Studies	X		X	X	
24	Pradhan Shrestha, Rosy; Jirakiattikul, Sopin; Shrestha, Mandip (Pradhan Shrestha et al. 2023)	"Electricity is result of my good deeds": An analysis of the benefit of rural electrification from the women's perspective in rural Nepal	2023	Energy Research & Social Science	X	X	X	X	X
25	Raynolds, Laura T. (Raynolds 2021)	Gender equity, labor rights, and women's empowerment: lessons from Fairtrade certification in Ecuador flower plantations	2021	Agriculture and Human Values	X	X	X	X	
26	Sarma, N. (Sarma 2022)	Domestic violence and workfare: An evaluation of India's MGNREGS	2022	World Development	X	X		X	
27	Shahwar, D.; Khan, I.A.; Farah, N.; Shahbaz, B. (Shahwar et al. 2021)	Obstacles and challanges for women empowerment in agriculture: The case of Rural Punjab, Pakistan	2021	Pakistan Journal of Agricultural Sciences	X	X	X	X	
28	Sharma, E.; Das, S. (Sharma and Das 2021)	Integrated model for women empowerment in rural India	2020	Journal of International Development	X	X	X	X	X
29	Sheldon, Hannah; Kaminaga, Allison Shwachman (Sheldon and Kaminaga 2023)	What's in a name? Property titling and women's empowerment in Benin	2023	Land Use Policy	X	X	X	X	
30	Shrestha, Gitta; Pakhtigian, Emily L.; Jeuland, Marc (Shrestha et al. 2023)	Women who do not migrate: Intersectionality, social relations, and participation in Western Nepal	2023	World Development	X		X	X	
31	Tagat, A. (Tagat 2020)	Female matters: Impact of a workfare program on intra-household female decision-making in rural India	2020	World Development Perspectives	X		X	X	

Table 5. *Cont.*

N°	Author	Title	Year of Publication	Journal	Categories Addressed				
					Rural Women	Women's Empowerment	Autonomy Approach	Decision-Making (Choice Theory)	Sustainable Development
32	Timsina, P.; Chaudhary, A.; Sharma, A.; Karki, E.; Suri, B.; Brown, B. (Timsina et al. 2023)	Necessity as a driver in bending agricultural gender norms in the Eastern Gangetic Plains of South Asia	2023	International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability	X	X	X	X	X
33	Wei, W.; Sarker, T.; Roy, R.; Sarkar, A.; Ghulam Rabbany, M. (Wei et al. 2021)	Women's empowerment and their experience to food security in rural Bangladesh	2021	Sociology of Health and Illness	X	X	X	X	X
34	Zheng, H.; Zhou, Y.; Rahut, D.B. (Zheng et al. 2023)	Smartphone use, off-farm employment, and women's decision-making power: Evidence from rural China	2023	Review of Development Economics	X	X	X	X	
35	Zumbyte, I. (Zumbyte 2021)	The gender system and class mobility: How wealth and community veiling shape women's autonomy in India	2021	Sociology of Development	X	X	X	X	

Source: own elaboration.

3. Analysis of Selected Materials and Discussion

All the scientific articles focused on rural women. After analysing the article abstracts, aspects related to the four categories discussed were identified: empowerment, autonomy, decision-making and sustainable development, the latter emerging from the literature reviewed. The articles with these approaches are distinguished below, considering that several studies include an integrated analysis (for example, they focus on factors of empowerment and/or autonomy and/or decision-making and/or sustainable development).

The following subsections present an in-depth analysis of the selected materials and discuss the findings in relation to the research question: Does empowerment in rural women lacking autonomy contribute to decision-making capacity?

3.1. Women's Empowerment

Thirty-one (31) of the thirty-five (35) articles focus on aspects related to women's empowerment. Women's empowerment in rural areas is widely discussed because of its relevance to sustainable development and gender equality, but it varies across cultural contexts and between poor or developing countries and developed countries (Haley and Marsh 2021; Wei et al. 2021; Ishfaq et al. 2023). The literature reviewed recognises the concept of women's empowerment as a multifaceted and dynamic process that is positive for women's well-being and related to the exercise of greater agency (capacity for action) to achieve their own aspirations (Haley and Marsh 2021). Theoretically, it commonly focuses on Kabeer's model, which comprises three dimensions that improve women's well-being: resources (material, human and social); agency or capacity for action (ability to set own goals, make decisions, negotiate and choose); and achievements (results of the capacity for action) (Ang and Lai 2023; Wei et al. 2021; Ghasemi et al. 2021; Kabeer 1999). Likewise, the authors emphasise that empowerment involves expanding freedom of choice and action (Wei et al. 2021).

To understand this concept in the case of rural women, studies use various dimensions and indicators. These include participation in decision-making at the individual, family and household levels (on production, income, expenditure, health, children's education, market purchases, mobility) (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Nath and Athinuwat 2021; Tagat 2020; Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Ghasemi et al. 2021), access to and control over productive and financial resources such as land, assets and credit (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Nath and Athinuwat 2021; Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020; Shahwar et al. 2021), educational level and awareness (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Nath and Athinuwat 2021; Wei et al. 2021), participation in groups and leadership roles (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Nath and Athinuwat 2021; Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Ghasemi et al. 2021), time allocation and workload (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Nath and Athinuwat 2021; Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Timsina et al. 2023) and attitudes towards domestic violence (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Abdu et al. 2022; Sarma 2022; Shrestha et al. 2023).

Under the quantitative approach, tools such as the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) and its adapted versions (pro-WEAI, A-WEAI) are used to measure these dimensions and gender parity at the household level (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Haley and Marsh 2021). Some studies seek to develop more comprehensive indices, such as the Rural Women's Composite Empowerment Index (RWCEI), which considers a broader range of domains (Ishfaq et al. 2023).

Despite advances in conceptualisation and measurement, the situation of rural women with regard to empowerment remains challenging in many regions. In patriarchal communities, they often lack access to physical, human and financial resources and have a limited role in agricultural and household decisions (Ishfaq et al. 2023). The vast majority of rural women in some contexts are employed as unpaid workers in agriculture, in addition to performing domestic and care work, which contributes to a gender productivity gap

(Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021) and leaves them vulnerable to claiming their human rights (Wei et al. 2021). In places such as Timor-Leste, they are more disempowered in the domains of time and leadership, often experiencing time poverty (Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021), while in other regions, such as the Eastern Gangetic Plain of South Asia, patriarchal norms limit their access to decision-making, information and mobility, despite increased participation in public spaces (Timsina et al. 2023). The burden of unpaid care work often persists despite changes in employment (Nhung et al. 2020; Islam and Sharma 2021).

The realisation of rural women's empowerment is influenced by a complex interaction of individual, household, community and structural factors. Household composition, for example, whether they are single mothers or widows, can affect their land rights and bargaining power, often mediated by social norms and previous relationships with their husbands (García-Reyes and Wiig 2020). Interestingly, some longitudinal studies in rural India have found that increases in household wealth over time may be negatively associated with married women's decision-making autonomy and mobility, suggesting the influence of community sociocultural attitudes (Zumbyte 2021). Male migration also drives changes in women's agricultural roles, often increasing their workload (Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020; Timsina et al. 2023). On the other hand, land acquisition for urbanisation can offer non-agricultural economic opportunities that improve women's economic position, although this does not always translate into greater empowerment in other dimensions such as unpaid care work or participation in social activities (Nhung et al. 2020; Islam and Sharma 2021). This underscores that empowerment is not a simple linear progression and is deeply intertwined with the local context and existing power structures (Haley and Marsh 2021; Ishfaq et al. 2023; García-Reyes and Wiig 2020).

Interventions and policies must be mindful of the complexity of rural women's empowerment, adopting multidimensional and locally tailored approaches that consider the interaction of resources, agency and achievements, as well as the factors that influence them at different levels (Ishfaq et al. 2023; García-Reyes and Wiig 2020; Abdu et al. 2022; Wei et al. 2021). The inclusion of men and a whole-family approach are also suggested as potentially more sustainable strategies in certain contexts (Haley and Marsh 2021; Abdu et al. 2022).

3.2. Focus on Women's Autonomy

Twenty-nine (29) of the thirty-five (35) articles focus on aspects related to women's autonomy. In developing countries, rural women's autonomy, i.e., their ability to act according to their own interests and desires, is limited. This situation is mainly due to social, cultural and/or religious barriers, as traditional patriarchal norms and hierarchies (entrenched gender norms) and religious beliefs limit such autonomy, resulting in restrictions on rural women's decision-making in the home and, consequently, limited or even non-existent community participation (Anyidoho 2020).

In this regard, several authors consider female autonomy in rural areas to be a central dimension of empowerment (Ang and Lai 2023; Ghasemi et al. 2021). This concept is often operationalised through rural women's ability to participate and make decisions within the household, in agricultural activities and in the community (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Nath and Athinuwat 2021; Okonya et al. 2021; Ortiz-Rodríguez and Picazzo-Palencia 2022; Ang and Lai 2023). Autonomy implies the ability to set one's own goals and act to achieve them (Ang and Lai 2023; Ghasemi et al. 2021), as well as the ability to exercise control over one's own life (Ghasemi et al. 2021; Wei et al. 2021). Some approaches measure it in terms of decision-making in specific domains such as production, income use, health, children's education, mobility and time use (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Nath and Athinuwat 2021; Ortiz-Rodríguez and Picazzo-Palencia 2022; Wei et al. 2021; Karimli et al. 2021), in contrast

to approaches that focus only on resources or achievements (Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Karimli et al. 2021). It is recognised that the meaning and expression of autonomy also vary according to cultural and regional context (Haley and Marsh 2021; Sharma and Das 2021; Timsina et al. 2023; Wei et al. 2021; Ishfaq et al. 2023), with local perceptions and social norm systems being important to consider (Haley and Marsh 2021; Ishfaq et al. 2023; Pradhan Shrestha et al. 2023; Timsina et al. 2023; Zumbyte 2021).

The situation of rural women in terms of autonomy is often characterised by low levels of participation in important decision-making and control over resources, despite their immense contribution to agricultural and domestic work (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020). In many rural societies, women face significant constraints imposed by rigid social norms, patriarchal structures and gender inequalities (Timsina et al. 2023; Zumbyte 2021; Ishfaq et al. 2023; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020; Raynolds 2021; Newsome 2021). These limitations manifest themselves in areas such as ownership and control of land and other productive assets (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020; Wei et al. 2021; Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; García-Reyes and Wiig 2020), access to credit and extension services (Wei et al. 2021) and participation in organisations or public spaces (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Wei et al. 2021; Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021). The traditional division of labour often confines women to labour- and time-intensive tasks (Timsina et al. 2023; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020), while men are considered the main decision-makers, even interrupting or dominating conversations about women's roles in agriculture (Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020). In some contexts, such as Timor-Leste, relatively high gender parity is observed in certain agricultural and income decisions, in line with collectivist values, although challenges persist in the domains of time and leadership (Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Islam and Sharma 2022). However, in general, studies highlight that disautonomia is prevalent, affecting women's ability to make decisions about their own health, mobility and even aspects such as sexual relations and contraceptive use (Ortiz-Rodríguez and Picazzo-Palencia 2022; Sheldon and Kaminaga 2023; Zumbyte 2021).

Similarly, factors such as access to economic resources (income, credit) and asset ownership are associated with greater bargaining power and autonomy (Karimli et al. 2021; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020; Tagat 2020; Wei et al. 2021; García-Reyes and Wiig 2020), although the relationship can be complex and not always linear, especially in contexts where cultural norms limit influence despite increased wealth (Zumbyte 2021). Education also emerges as a key factor in improving autonomy (Ang and Lai 2023; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020; Ishfaq et al. 2023; Sharma and Das 2021; Essilfie et al. 2021), as does participation in farmer groups or organisations (Abdu et al. 2022; Gonzaga et al. 2022; Okonya et al. 2021; Wei et al. 2021). Interventions aimed at strengthening women's economic capacities and position, such as microfinance programmes or direct cash transfers, can increase their decision-making capacity (Karimli et al. 2021; Tagat 2020), although their effectiveness may be limited by existing gender norms if power relations within the household are not directly addressed (Tagat 2020; Karimli et al. 2021). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are also identified as tools that can empower rural women by improving access to information and opportunities (Wei et al. 2021; Zheng et al. 2023).

3.3. Decision-Making

Thirty (30) of the thirty-five (35) articles relate to aspects focused on rural women's decision-making. In this regard, the literature reviewed addresses rural women's decision-making as a central aspect of their empowerment and agency (Ang and Lai 2023; Wei et al. 2021; Shahwar et al. 2021). This category is conceptualised and measured through the assessment of women's ability to make and influence decisions and participate in the definition of objectives (Ang and Lai 2023; Wei et al. 2021). This measurement assesses

specific domains such as household purchases, own and children's health, children's education/marriage, use of own and spouse's income, agricultural activities (production, inputs), resources (land, assets, credit), mobility and community participation (Karimli et al. 2021; Tagat 2020; Ishfaq et al. 2023; Haley and Marsh 2021; Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Sheldon and Kaminaga 2023; Okonya et al. 2021). It is also measured by analysing who makes decisions (alone, with a partner, jointly) (Karimli et al. 2021; Ishfaq et al. 2023; Ortiz-Rodríguez and Picazzo-Palencia 2022; García-Reyes and Wiig 2020; Sheldon and Kaminaga 2023) and its meaning varies according to context (Haley and Marsh 2021; Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021).

Despite assessments and measurements, the situation of rural women with regard to decision-making is often characterised by low levels of participation and influence in critical decisions in the home, property and community (Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Ishfaq et al. 2023; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020). In other words, the significant contribution of rural women to the labour force is limited by restrictive social norms, patriarchal structures and gender inequality (Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Ishfaq et al. 2023; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020; Karimli et al. 2021; Bhutia 2021). Specific limitations are observed in decisions regarding control over resources (land, assets) (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Jain et al. 2023; Sheldon and Kaminaga 2023), personal life (health, mobility, sexuality) (Ishfaq et al. 2023, Ortiz-Rodríguez and Picazzo-Palencia 2022; Sheldon and Kaminaga 2023; Akter 2021) and agricultural activities (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020). Men often dominate discussions, interrupting or speaking for women, and studies generally point to the prevalence of low decision-making capacity (Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020).

All of the above are due to various factors that influence rural women's decision-making. Greater access to economic resources (income, credit) and asset ownership are positively associated with greater influence (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Karimli et al. 2021; Zumbyte 2021; Sheldon and Kaminaga 2023; Tagat 2020); higher levels of education and participation in groups or off-farm employment also tend to improve decision-making (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Okonya et al. 2021; Ortiz-Rodríguez and Picazzo-Palencia 2022; Abdu et al. 2022; Mechlowitz et al. 2023; Haley and Marsh 2021; Zheng et al. 2023).

3.4. Sustainable Development

Only thirteen (13) of the thirty-five (35) articles refer to the category of sustainable development. Climate change is a challenge that affects the agricultural sector and disproportionately affects rural women around the world. However, they stand out for leading climate change adaptation and mitigation processes, implementing resilient and sustainable agricultural practices. For example, in Nepal, rural women have implemented technologies for crop conservation and water conservation; in Brazil, they lead initiatives for the protection of indigenous crops and biodiversity conservation.

The category of sustainable development in relation to rural women is studied in particular through empowerment and gender equality (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Newsome 2021; Nhung et al. 2020; Ang and Lai 2023; Sheldon and Kaminaga 2023; Ghasemi et al. 2021). The authors conceptualise rural women as key actors in achieving sustainable development goals, especially in the economic, social and environmental spheres (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Nhung et al. 2020; Ang and Lai 2023; Sheldon and Kaminaga 2023; Ghasemi et al. 2021). It is emphasised that equitable access to resources and women's participation in decision-making are crucial to increasing agricultural productivity, improving food and nutrition security and promoting more sustainable practices (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Essilfie et al. 2021). The consideration of a gender perspective in development interventions is necessary to maximise the benefits for rural women and contribute to more equitable and sustainable development (Pradhan Shrestha et al. 2023).

However, the situation of rural women in relation to sustainable development is often characterised by structural inequalities and rigid social norms that limit their full participation and enjoyment of benefits (Nhung et al. 2020; Ishfaq et al. 2023; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020; Timsina et al. 2023). As noted above, despite their extraordinary contribution to agricultural and domestic work, rural women often lack control over land and other productive assets and face barriers to accessing essential services (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020). The burden of unpaid care work limits their time to participate in economic or community activities that could improve their well-being and their ability to contribute to development (Pradhan Shrestha et al. 2023; Nhung et al. 2020; Pattnaik and Lahiri-Dutt 2020; Timsina et al. 2023).

However, studies also explore how certain changes can improve their situation, such as through access to education, economic resources such as income or credit, and participation in groups or organisations that can strengthen their decision-making power and position (Nhung et al. 2020; Abdu et al. 2022; Ishfaq et al. 2023; Tagat 2020). Similarly, the shift towards non-agricultural employment, sometimes driven by land acquisition, can offer higher incomes, but it can also lead to job insecurity and increase the burden of double work (Nhung et al. 2020). These factors demonstrate that the trajectory of rural women within sustainable development is complex and highly dependent on context and specific interventions (Timsina et al. 2023; Nhung et al. 2020; Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021).

3.5. Limitations of the Study

Acknowledging the limitations of the study strengthens the transparency and robustness of the study and guides future research. Although this review provides a comprehensive overview of rural women's empowerment, autonomy and decision-making, it is important to recognise certain methodological limitations:

- Language restriction. The review was limited to the literature published in English and Spanish. This decision facilitated the rigorous analysis of the texts; however, it may have excluded relevant research published in other languages such as French, Portuguese, Chinese, Hindi, Arabic or other languages in other latitudes such as West Africa, Southeast Asia or the Middle East. This exclusion of languages may reduce the overall representativeness of the findings.
- Reliance on secondary sources. The study relied on secondary information extracted from scientific articles. Although these studies were carefully selected using PRISMA criteria, the quality and consistency of the data vary across research, as indicators of empowerment, autonomy and decision-making are not always homogeneous or comparable across contexts, which may affect the generalisability of the conclusions.
- Possible publication bias and open access. The search prioritised indexed and open access journals. These articles facilitate dissemination but do not necessarily represent the totality of knowledge produced.
- Predominant quantitative approach. Most of the included studies employed quantitative methodologies and the use of empowerment indices (such as the WEAI). This implies a possible underrepresentation of qualitative or participatory approaches to understanding the symbolic, subjective and contextual dimensions of rural women's power.

4. Conclusions

The empowerment of rural women is essential to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially with regard to poverty eradication and the promotion of gender equality. Therefore, collaboration between governments, international organisations and local communities is key to overcoming the barriers faced by rural women and ensuring their full participation in economic and social development.

To promote the autonomy of rural women, public policies that address the root causes of gender inequality must be implemented. These policies should focus on economic empowerment, access to basic services, political participation and the transformation of social norms. Likewise, differences in the economic context remain a universal challenge, requiring specific policies to ensure that rural women can fully exercise their right to decision-making.

Specifically, key recommendations revolve around the need for integrated approaches that overcome economic, social and structural barriers. Similarly, strengthening education and employability are ways to improve women's status and decision-making capacity. Interventions must be culturally sensitive and involve other members of the household, especially men, to challenge restrictive gender norms. It is also vital to address intra-household gender dynamics so that resources translate into autonomy. Encouraging participation in groups and organisations is crucial to increasing their influence. Policy-makers and development professionals must implement participatory processes in which rural women are active agents in decision-making.

Likewise, future research is suggested to explore the complex interaction of wealth, social norms, family composition and location on female autonomy in urban and rural settings. The need for more qualitative studies to deepen understanding of gender relations and intra-household dynamics is highlighted. Methodologically, longitudinal data are recommended. Research into the long-term impact of interventions and the causal relationships between empowerment and other development outcomes is also proposed.

Likewise, the delimitation of the institutional settings in this study was not performed in an exclusive manner but was the result of the methodological approach of the review and the predominant thematic axes in the available empirical scientific literature. However, it is recognised that a broader look at the spaces where rural women exercise agency, including religion, education and/or health, also represents a relevant line for future research. This review also suggests future research aimed at the inclusion of multilingual secondary sources, mixed methodologies and greater epistemological and geographical diversity.

Finally, based on the findings of this review, a practical model composed of five strategic and interdependent dimensions for strengthening rural women's autonomy and facilitating sustainable empowerment is proposed (Table 6).

Table 6. Practical model for facilitating empowerment and strengthening rural women's autonomy.

Strategic Dimensions	Findings or Evidence	Recommendations
1. Economic autonomy and access to resources	Evidence shows that ownership and control of assets (land, income, credit, technology) are directly related to greater decision-making capacity (Ishfaq et al. 2023; Karimli et al. 2021).	1. Guarantee equitable access to productive resources. 2. Promote land titling policies in the name of women. 3. Promote microfinance initiatives and rural value chains with a gender focus.
2. Education and capacity building	Educational attainment and functional literacy impact decisional autonomy (Ang and Lai 2023).	1. To offer continuous and technical training in agricultural, financial and leadership issues. 2. Incorporate sexual and reproductive health and rights education. 3. Encourage mentoring programmes and learning networks among women.

Table 6. *Cont.*

Strategic Dimensions	Findings or Evidence	Recommendations
3. Participation in community spaces and collective decision-making	Active participation in organisations and committees strengthens collective agency (Abdu et al. 2022).	1. Create and support rural women's groups with deliberative power. 2. Include women in local governance and community consultation mechanisms. 3. Promote intersectoral alliances that listen to their demands.
4. Transformation of sociocultural norms	Entrenched gender norms restrict autonomy (Bonis-Profumo et al. 2021; Zumbyte 2021).	1. Conduct community awareness-raising campaigns on gender equality. 2. Promote models of co-responsibility in households. 3. Involve men and community leaders in processes of cultural change.
5. Strengthening inner power (subjective agenda)	Empowerment is also underpinned by self-esteem, dignity and critical awareness (Rowlands 1997).	1. Include psychosocial components in the intervention programmes. 2. Develop participatory methodologies where women narrate and re-signify their trajectories. 3. Promote access to accurate, inclusive and accessible information about their rights.

Source: own elaboration.

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