

Examining gender empowerment during Unilever's CSR activities: social communication aspects

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Abstract This study investigates how gender empowerment affects Unilever's CSR social media output. Given the increasing relevance of CSR in corporate identity and social development, this research examines how well CSR initiatives could convey and support female emancipation. With an eye towards Unilever, a global business leader, the company emphasises sustainability and responsibility. This paper argues that corporate strategy depends on CSR and that social justice and sustainable development depend on women's empowerment. The study looks at the junction of gender and corporate responsibility using feminist theory and corporate communication, therefore investigating how CSR social media may empower women. Additionally, Unilever's CSR and gender empowerment reports as well as community leaders were examined and interviewed. This method makes clear the objectives of female empowerment and CSR. Initial results imply that CSR projects by Unilever help women. Good social communication plans call for respect of indigenous cultural norms and values, open communication, and community involvement. Emphasising the need of integrating women in the design and execution of CSR projects to meet their needs and viewpoints. The studies stress that there are important pragmatic implications from this research. It presents a disciplined framework to assess the social justice impact of corporate actions and offers strategic social communication recommendations for empowering women via CSR, hence, improving CSR and gender research. The report highlights opportunities for development in CSR strategies and best practices, therefore guiding governments and corporate leaders. According to the results, women can be empowered by CSR; social influence depends mostly on communication. Thus, a more complete CSR plan and communication must prioritise social justice—especially women's empowerment.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; corporate communication; gender empowerment; social communication

INTRODUCTION

Gender empowerment inside an organisation is integral to current corporate strategy and societal growth (Susilo & Sugihartati, 2019; Winarnita et al., 2020; Wood, 1984). It includes activities to promote gender equality, provide opportunities for women and other underrepresented genders, and create a diverse and inclusive workplace (Formato, 2019; Routledge International Handbook of Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health, 2019). Corporations play an essential role in fostering female empowerment by enacting policies and practices that promote equity (Sahi et al., 2023; Stephenson et al., 2023; Yeasmin et al., 2024). This article examines several aspects of women empowerment through CSR Activities, focusing on significant cases and the beneficial outcomes of these programs. Gender empowerment is both a moral and ethical necessity and a strategic corporate benefit.

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Companies that encourage gender diversity frequently report higher financial performance, more creativity, and a better grasp of their client base. By encouraging inclusive and fair development, gender empowerment becomes increasingly important in improving the efficacy of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Using several points of view and skills, including gender empowerment into CSR projects not only addresses social justice but also supports sustainable growth. Moreover, businesses that give women empowerment top priority in their CSR plans usually see better brand reputation and stakeholder confidence, which promotes long-term corporate success. Furthermore, women's empowerment helps to create a more just and equitable society by resolving long-standing imbalances and fostering social cohesiveness (De Celis et al., 2015; Walters, 2022).

As a global corporate social responsibility (CSR) model, Unilever has consistently committed to integrating moral and sustainable business practices into all operations models (Hasanah et al., 2024; Iglesias et al., 2023; Putra et al., 2023). Established in over 190 countries and with a broad product and retail line, Unilever has a presence in some corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects, including environmental sustainability, social fairness, and economic growth (Iglesias et al., 2023; Ismaeel & Alsariera, 2023). The fundamental CSR belief of Unilever is that businesses can address some of the most pressing global problems, such as climate change, water scarcity, and social inequality (Ismaeel & Alsariera, 2023; Tandoh & Duffour, 2023). Using its Sustainable Living Plan, Unilever aims to reduce its negative social impact, increase its positive environmental impact, and inspire others to do the same. This strong strategy emphasises the need for Unilever to ethically and successfully inform stakeholders throughout the world about these efforts.

Unilever's social communication strategies are defined by inventiveness, engagement, and transparency, which are crucial to the success of its CSR initiatives (Checchinato, 2021). Understanding the value of effective communication in CSR initiatives, Unilever employs a multifaceted approach to inform a global audience about company objectives, processes, and accomplishments (Checchinato, 2021; Pambudi, 2022; Tandoh & Duffour, 2023). This includes narrating tales on digital media, working with NGOs and local communities for a more significant impact, and reaching a wider audience with traditional media. Utilising these channels, Unilever disseminates information regarding its CSR initiatives and encourages ongoing interaction with stakeholders, clients, and the public. This way, Unilever ensures that its CSR programmes are viewed as vital elements of its larger business plan, deeply ingrained in the operations and culture of the organisation and driven by the invaluable contributions of its stakeholders rather than as a straightforward corporate charity (Pambudi, 2022).

Recognising women's critical role in advancing social progress and sustainable development, Unilever is firmly dedicated to gender empowerment in its CSR programmes. With its initiatives, Unilever aggressively advances gender equality and women's empowerment to reverse structural inequalities and release women's ability to effect change. This dedication is shown utilising focused collaborations and programmes that strengthen health and well-being, promote inclusiveness, and improve livelihoods. These programmes empower women throughout the Unilever value chain and establish a standard for companies using social media to advance gender equality and improve their CSR impact.

Research regularly reveals that organisations with diverse leadership teams outperform their peers financially. Gender-diverse teams provide unique viewpoints, resulting in excellent decision-making and creativity (Formato, 2019; Ivy & Backlund, 2004). When personnel of diverse genders and backgrounds cooperate, they contribute new perspectives and methods to issue resolution. This variety of thinking is essential for fostering innovation and competitiveness in today's changing corporate world.

Unilever's approach to gender empowerment begins within the organisation. The corporation has set lofty goals for achieving gender balance at all levels of management. According to recent studies, women make up over half of Unilever's global executive roles, a significant milestone in an industry that is sometimes criticised for gender inequities. This success is the consequence of purposeful measures designed to foster an inclusive workplace. These policies include flexible working arrangements, increased maternity leave, and mentorship programs aimed at assisting women's professional advancement. Alan Jope, Unilever's CEO, has been vocal about the need for gender equality, emphasising the view that diverse teams provide superior business results. This leadership commitment has been critical in cultivating a

culture of diversity and inclusion (Sari, 2015). Furthermore, Unilever's internal programs, such as the Stereotype Alliance, aim to eliminate gender prejudice in the workplace, ensuring that all workers, regardless of gender, have equal opportunity to succeed.

Unilever's brands are important in addressing gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality. Dove, one of Unilever's most well-known brands, has pioneered this approach with its campaigns. Dove's Real Beauty campaign, started in 2004, aimed to challenge conventional beauty standards and encourage body positivity. This advertisement spoke to millions of women globally and generated a larger discourse about self-esteem and body image, urging women to embrace their unique beauty. Another notable project is Sunsilk's partnership with the United Nations to develop the 'Dream Big' campaign, which empowers young women by giving them the tools and confidence they need to achieve their goals. Similarly, the company Lifebuoy has concentrated on teaching moms about the need of hygiene, providing women with knowledge that might benefit their families' health (Mahajan, 2016).

Unilever recognises that attaining gender equality needs collaborative efforts that extend beyond its immediate domain. As a result, the corporation collaborates with various organisations and takes part in worldwide initiatives to promote gender equality. For example, Unilever was a founding member of the UN Women's HeForShe initiative, which encourages men to fight for gender equality. This engagement demonstrates Unilever's understanding of the need of involving both genders in the goal of equality. Unilever also works with NGOs and governments to establish initiatives that help women in the areas where it operates. Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan strives to improve the livelihoods of millions of women by offering training, resources, and possibilities for economic involvement. This strategy includes efforts such as Project Shakti in India, which trains rural women to become micro-entrepreneurs and market Unilever products in local communities. This initiative not only helps women's economic standing but also benefits local economies and promotes Unilever products (Hopkinson & Aman, 2017).

This study intends to address the main issue of enhancing women's empowerment through Unilever's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives by examining the effectiveness of social communication approaches. The effectiveness of Unilever's CSR activities aimed at enhancing gender equality will largely depend on how well these programmes are communicated and perceived by various stakeholders, notwithstanding the substantial financial investments made by the company. The challenge lies in reaching the appropriate individuals and fostering genuine engagement and understanding in these messages. Navigating challenging social and cultural contexts can involve encountering nuanced variations in gender-related issues. Therefore, Unilever must create a social communication plan that is effective in many environments and communities to enhance its overall corporate social responsibility (CSR) performance. This study highlights the intersection between gender, CSR performance, and social communication on the Unilever's CSR activities.

A further component of the issue involves quantifying the impact of various communication strategies on the outcomes of women empowerment. There is still a requirement to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of CSR efforts and the accompanying communications. Are the messages being offered empowering women and promoting gender equality? Do inclusive communication approaches adequately ensure the representation of women's demands and voices? To address these matters, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive analysis of how Unilever communicates its corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, both in terms of content and delivery, and to evaluate how these messages are received and their impact on the intended recipients. By analysing these factors, the study aims to identify the most effective strategies and potential areas for improvement, thereby contributing to the success and impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts focused on empowering women.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a research design to evaluate Unilever's social communication strategies in promoting gender empowerment through its CSR activities, thereby addressing the complexities of the task. This method integrates qualitative methodologies to collect comprehensive data, enabling a nuanced examination of the efficacy of communication strategies and their influence on gender empowerment outcomes. The research examines

metrics associated with gender empowerment initiatives, including the number of women affected, the categories of programmes implemented, and the results of these programmes, as reported in Unilever's annual CSR reports. This data is further supported by a content analysis of Unilever's digital and traditional media communications, which evaluates the transparency, inclusiveness, and cultural sensitivity of messages concerning gender empowerment.

The study involves a wide range of stakeholders through semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2017) and focus groups, including Unilever staff members engaged in corporate social responsibility projects, participants in gender empowerment programmes, and community leaders from areas where these programmes have been carried out (See Table 1). The objective of this qualitative data collection is to obtain the perceptions and experiences of individuals who are directly involved in or impacted by Unilever's CSR initiatives (Kim & Manoli, 2020; Oh et al., 2023; Song & Tao, 2022). This will provide a comprehensive understanding of the efficacy of communication strategies from a variety of perspectives. The interviews and focus groups are intended to investigate topics such as the perceived authenticity of CSR communications, the engagement and empowerment of women through these initiatives, and the influence of cultural context on the reception and impact of CSR messages (Salim, 2014).

Table 1. Informant Background

Informant	Age	Gender
U	33 y.o	Female
A	34 y.o.	Female
V	42 y.o.	Female
W	41 y.o	Female
X	48 y.o.	Female

Source: Author Data Processed (2024)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Unilever Sustainable Living Plan and Women Empowerment

The Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) is one of the most ambitious and comprehensive corporate sustainability programs of the twenty-first century. Launched in 2010, the plan demonstrates Unilever's ambition to triple its business while decreasing its environmental footprint and improving its positive social effect. This effort is more than simply a business strategy; it is a vision for integrating sustainability into all aspects of Unilever's operations, with the goal of influencing larger change across sectors and communities worldwide (Susilowati, 2018a).

Unilever aimed to provide safe drinking water, promote better sanitation and hygiene, and improve nutrition through brands such as Lifebuoy, Pureit, and Knorr by reformulating products to meet stringent nutrition standards, reducing salt, sugar, and saturated fats, and fortifying foods with essential nutrients. Unilever tried to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from manufacturing, logistics, and product consumption. This includes advancements in product design, such as concentrated detergents that use less packaging and energy. Finally, empowering women via programs that promote women's rights, education, and entrepreneurship (Xavier et al., 2008).

Informant A, who is involved as a Unilever Indonesia Representative, summoned USLP as the key to understanding Unilever's CSR Activities in general. Including the key messages to understand how women empowerment is included into CSR Social Communication.

"At Unilever, we believe USLP as part of our commitment to the Sustainable Mother Earth. That includes how we do women's collaboration to understand the mission of USLP and preserve the environment." (Informant A, 10-02-2024)

Since its inception, the USLP has achieved tremendous progress in various areas. By 2019, Unilever claimed to have helped 1.3 billion people better their health and hygiene. The firm achieved 100% renewable power consumption throughout its global operations and considerably decreased its trash footprint. Unilever's sustainable sourcing initiatives have also proven noteworthy. By 2019, the firm has procured 62% of its agricultural raw materials responsibly. This achievement has been made possible by collaborations with groups like the

Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade which promote sustainable farming techniques that safeguard biodiversity and farmers' livelihoods.

The firm has also made significant strides toward lowering greenhouse gas emissions. Innovations such as compressed deodorant sprays, which require less propellant and packaging, and the introduction of plant-based product lines have helped to reduce emissions. In terms of waste reduction, Unilever reached 0% non-hazardous waste to landfill in all its plants by 2015. The firm has also been a pioneer in combating plastic waste, committing to making 100% of its plastic packaging reusable, recyclable, or compostable by 2025.

By analysing Unilever's social communication methods within the framework of the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP), researchers can obtain valuable insights about the company's endeavours to advance female empowerment. Based on quantifiable data from Unilever's CSR reports, the corporation has achieved significant advancements in improving women's lives through its efforts. For instance, initiatives such as the Shakti programme in India have empowered many women by providing them entrepreneurial prospects and training. The statistical study demonstrates a positive association between women's participation in these activities and the resulting empowering outcomes. These results encompass a rise in earnings and an enhancement in self-confidence. However, the statistics also reveal differences in the extent and influence of these activities in various regions, suggesting that localised methods may be necessary to address distinct cultural and socio-economic obstacles.

Similar to the pilot project in India, Unilever Indonesia create the activities such as *Kelompok Unit Bisnis (KUB)*, *Lembaga Keuangan Perempuan (LKP)*, and *Kelompok Tani Perempuan (KWT)* to addressing the same goal at USLP. Two informants from KWT, which is part of the Agricultural Women Group managed by Unilever, mentioned this program as Unilever initiatives to extend the micro financing accessibility special for Women.

"Some of the programs at KWT do not only adhere to Agriculture or environmental sustainability. We got some soft loans to empower women to do crafting while we are on the break in farming, like during the rainy season." (Informant V, 10-02-2024)

"They (Unilever's CSR) facilitate us, agricultural women, into the training of Financial Literacy and also accommodate on soft loan." (Informant U, 10-02-2024)

The qualitative findings from interviews and focus groups further underline the need for culturally responsive communication strategies to enhance the effectiveness of Unilever's gender empowerment efforts. Participants regularly highlighted the significance of aligning messaging with local beliefs and norms to enhance their likelihood of success. In regions where conventional gender roles are well entrenched, communication tactics highlighting the advantages for families and communities generally lead to more favourable outcomes. This discovery aligns with feminist communication theories that advocate for utilising context-specific messaging to guarantee inclusivity and pertinence. Furthermore, stakeholders emphasised the significance of sustaining a constant discussion and establishing feedback systems to adjust and enhance communication tactics consistently.

After examining Unilever's media strategies, which include both digital and conventional platforms, one can see that there is a purposeful focus on storytelling and the use of relatable role models to effectively communicate messages of empowerment. Unilever's campaigns often feature authentic narratives of women who have directly benefited from its efforts. These stories provide tangible instances of achievement and possess the ability to motivate others. This approach not only incorporates a personalised element into the brand but also fosters a perception of dependability and assurance among the intended recipients. In addition, the analysis identifies places where Unilever's marketing may be more inclusive by featuring a broader spectrum of voices and experiences. Multiple stakeholders have noted that while the stories are impactful, they tend to concentrate on extraordinary success stories, thus leaving out individuals who have not undergone such remarkable changes in their own lives.

The results of this study indicate that Unilever's social communication techniques, as part of the USLP, have been highly successful in fostering gender empowerment. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that there are still aspects that could be further improved.

Challenge and Criticism on Gender Empowerment Program

Unilever's Women empowerment projects face several problems and complaints that affect their overall performance, as seen from the analysis. A vital obstacle highlighted is the absence of uniformity in the execution of programmes across different locations. Initiatives such as the Shakti programme in India have shown significant success in empowering women. However, similar programmes in other areas have not had similar outcomes. An absence of tailored strategies that include the region's unique socio-economic and cultural circumstances could be a potential explanation for this inconsistency. Stakeholders from the underperforming areas indicated their perception that the activities were not adequately customised to address their requirements, leading to decreased involvement and effectiveness. Unilever must prioritise the development of region-specific strategies to successfully tackle distinct problems and capitalise on local advantages.

It is crucial to consider another significant matter with the notion of tokenism in specific women empowerment efforts carried out by Unilever. Interviews and focus groups showed that some participants and observers perceive these programmes as lacking in substance or as simple public relations strategies rather than genuine efforts to bring about significant societal transformation. This critique is frequently noted in regions where the projects have not been well publicised or where the benefits have not been sufficiently communicated to the local population. Some local officials have expressed scepticism about Unilever's commitment to these projects in the long run. Their inquiry concerns the company's genuine dedication to empowering women against its primary emphasis on enhancing its corporate reputation. This view has the capacity to undermine trust and impede the efficacy of the programmes (See Figure 1).

Unilever's social communications highlight the integration of CSR and women's empowerment as global values and part of their responsibility as a global corporation. Academicians, especially communication scholars, should criticise this social communication. CSR can be as broader as corporate action to do their green and social washing on corporate activities; meanwhile, the women are empowered not only to do ceremonial activities but deeper into the core values and spreading the gender acceleration values into the society (Bernath, 2016; Khan, 2018; Nugraheni & Widyaningrum, 2019; Yanti et al., 2023 Clark et al., 2022; Khan, 2018; Paludi & Denmark, 2018; Price, 2015; Suwana & Lily, 2017)



Figure 1. Model Integration of CSR and Women Empowerment as Communicated by Unilever
Source: Author Findings (2024)

Furthermore, the analysis emphasises a significant discrepancy in the inclusivity of Unilever's gender empowerment initiatives. It is essential to mention that certain endeavours aimed at empowering women have faced criticism for not sufficiently addressing intersectional concerns, including race, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic status. The lack of inclusivity may result in the programmes not adequately addressing the needs of all women, particularly those from underprivileged groups. For instance, certain interviewees belonging to minority groups experienced a sense of exclusion from the programmes or a lack of recognition for their unique issues. Recognising the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to gender empowerment is essential. This approach considers many dimensions of identity and disadvantage.

There are concerns about the efficiency of the feedback systems in Unilever's female empowerment projects, including suggestions that they may lack comprehensiveness. Several participants have indicated a desire for more regular and substantial opportunities to provide feedback, with the expectation that their feedback will be actively acknowledged and acted upon. In the absence of strong feedback mechanisms, there is a potential for a lack of

communication and understanding between those who create programmes and those who benefit from them. This can lead to activities that may not comprehensively address the requirements or fulfil the expectations of the target populations. Unilever can continuously enhance its initiatives by boosting these methods and incorporating real-world experiences and insights from those directly impacted. Improving the success of the initiatives will not only build trust, but also encourage more active involvement from the participants.

Unilever's women empowerment initiatives have achieved notable accomplishments, although they also face substantial obstacles and criticisms that demand consideration. By implementing localised and inclusive tactics, making a genuine commitment to long-term empowerment goals, and developing feedback channels, Unilever can greatly improve the effect and perception of its women's empowerment programmes. It is crucial to tackle these concerns to guarantee the effectiveness and authenticity of the programmes and to promote genuine and inclusive efforts towards substantial social change. (Susanti & Rochman, 2017; Susilowati, 2018b).

Despite its successes, the USLP has faced hurdles and criticism. One of the most challenging challenges has been the sheer size and complexity of implementing such a comprehensive plan across a worldwide business. Maintaining uniformity and adherence to sustainability standards across regions and markets has necessitated significant work and expenditure. Critics have also noted that, while Unilever has made progress, some objectives have not been completely accomplished (Susanti & Rochman, 2017; Susilowati, 2018b).

For example, ensuring 100% sustainable procurement of agricultural raw materials has proven to be a difficult and constant task. Additionally, while Unilever has decreased its environmental effect in many areas, the company's total expansion makes absolute reductions in emissions and waste more difficult to accomplish. Furthermore, some environmentalists believe that huge firms like Unilever should take even more active steps to address concerns such as plastic waste and climate change. They advocate for greater openness and accountability in progress reporting, as well as establishing even more ambitious goals for the future (Goute et al., 2021).

Looking ahead, Unilever is dedicated to its sustainability efforts. The lessons learnt from the USLP have influenced the company's future strategy, which maintains sustainability as a major corporate goal. In 2020, Unilever unveiled a new set of promises under the Unilever Compass, which was built on the USLP's basis. The Unilever Compass intends to continue driving good change by establishing ambitious new goals for 2030, such as attaining net-zero emissions across its value chain, decreasing the amount of virgin plastic used in packaging, and guaranteeing that all workers in its supply chain are paid a liveable wage. Unilever also intends to expand its efforts to promote social fairness and inclusion, with a particular emphasis on empowering women and encouraging racial and cultural diversity inside the organisation (Dr. Santosh Vadhya, 2020).

The Unilever Sustainable Living Plan has established a standard for corporate sustainability activities, proving that it is possible to expand a corporation while also making a beneficial contribution to society and environment. Unilever has demonstrated that corporations can be a force for good by incorporating sustainability into their fundamental strategy, generating meaningful change on a large scale. The path has not been without hurdles, and much work remains to be done. However, the work accomplished via the USLP lays a solid platform for future endeavours. As Unilever's sustainability strategy evolves, it remains a worldwide leader in the push for a more sustainable and equitable future.

CONCLUSION

The study underlines the ability of corporate social responsibility (CSR) to empower women and the need of using efficient communication strategies to achieve this social impact. By empowering women, CSR initiatives must give social justice strategies top priority if they want to make a meaningful impact. Companies should give top priority to creating inclusive and tailored CSR programmes to the sociocultural conditions of different places. Use of inclusive communication strategies that enable different voices—especially those of minority groups—to be heard and represented is also essential. Achieving meaningful and frequent feedback mechanisms is necessary to keep assessing and raising the efficiency of these initiatives.

Moreover, by putting CSR programmes into practice, this strategy would not only improve the company's brand but also significantly influence society.

Moreover, this research introduces a systematic approach that could greatly benefit the fields of gender studies and corporate social responsibility (CSR) by assessing the impact of company actions on equity. Through the establishment of exact performance indicators connected to women's empowerment, regular monitoring of these metrics, and transparent sharing of the results, companies may demonstrate the sincerity and impact of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes.

The degree of openness in this setting promotes confidence and makes community and corporate cooperation easier. It can also encourage partnerships to be formed with governmental organisations to spark major changes in society. In the end, corporate social responsibility programmes will be strengthened, and this methodical and analytical approach to social communication and evaluation will promote gender parity and sustainable development. For governments and company executives planning and carrying out their CSR initiatives, it is a great advantage.

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