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A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE INFLUENCE OF EMPOWERMENT THROUGH MENTORSHIP ON THE GROWTH OF FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
This systematic review examined the influence of empowerment through mentorship on the growth of female entrepreneurship in Nigeria. With the growing emphasis on women's economic empowerment in developing nations, mentorship has emerged as a crucial mechanism for fostering entrepreneurial success among women. This paper synthesized evidence from peer-reviewed literature and policy reports to explore how mentorship programs contribute to the development of female entrepreneurs. The review identified key mentorship frameworks, highlights successful mentorship initiatives, and discusses barriers to effective mentorship. The findings provided insights into best practices and offered recommendations for scaling mentorship programs to accelerate female entrepreneurship in Nigeria.
Keywords: Mentorship, Female Entrepreneurship, Empowerment, Economic Growth, Gender Equality.

INTRODUCTION

Women's entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a vital driver of economic growth, social transformation, and sustainable development across the globe (Al-Qahtani et al., 2022). In Nigeria, women represent a substantial proportion of the informal economy and are key contributors to the economic well-being of their households and communities. Strengthening female entrepreneurship in Nigeria has the potential to alleviate poverty, generate employment opportunities, and promote economic resilience (Nwakanma, 2021; Peter & Orser, 2024). Despite this potential, women entrepreneurs face systemic challenges that hinder their ability to thrive. These challenges include restricted access to financial resources, limited educational opportunities, gender biases, and inadequate institutional support systems (Chrysostome et al., 2024; Ogbari et al., 2024).

Cultural and societal norms often exacerbate the challenges faced by women in entrepreneurship, creating significant barriers to their success and sustainability. These norms frequently result in skepticism about women's capabilities, limiting their access to opportunities and undermining the legitimacy of their business pursuits (Muhammad, 2023). Many women entrepreneurs must contend with deeply entrenched gender biases that discourage them from exploring new markets, expanding their businesses, or engaging in high-growth industries. This persistent discrimination not only affects their confidence but also restricts access to critical resources, such as funding, mentorship, and professional networks. Such a constrained operating environment stresses the urgent need for innovative, inclusive, and targeted interventions. Supporting female entrepreneurs

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through empowerment programs is essential for unlocking their potential and fostering sustainable economic growth in Nigeria (Mashapure et al., 2022; Afolabi, 2024).

Mentorship has emerged as a crucial empowerment tool to address these challenges, offering a structured platform for learning, personal growth, and professional network building by connecting aspiring entrepreneurs with experienced individuals. Mentorship programs provide a unique avenue for guidance, insight-sharing, and confidence-building, particularly in navigating the complexities of competitive business environments (Ngalesoni et al., 2024). Such programs empower mentees to refine their entrepreneurial skill sets while offering practical solutions to real-world challenges. Researches, Kuratko et al. (2020); Wang & Shibayama (2022) and Ngalesoni et al. (2024) further highlight the transformative potential of mentorship, showing that it not only enhances entrepreneurial competencies but also facilitates access to broader networks, fosters critical resource acquisition, and builds resilience against systemic and cultural barriers.

In contexts like Nigeria, mentorship can play a pivotal role in bridging opportunity gaps and driving sustainable business growth for women entrepreneurs (Muhammad et al., 2024). In Nigerian, mentorship holds particular significance, offering women a powerful avenue to overcome structural barriers and navigate cultural restrictions that often impede their entrepreneurial pursuits. These programs are tailored to address the unique challenges faced by Nigerian women, such as limited access to education, financial resources, and professional networks by bridging knowledge gaps, facilitating access to critical resources, and cultivating leadership skills, mentorship equips women with the tools needed to thrive in competitive markets (Ihejiamaizu & Inyang, 2022; Aluko et al., 2024).

Various Nigerian agencies, the World Bank, NGOs, and philanthropists have invested in youth entrepreneurship to promote job creation, poverty reduction, and economic diversification. Their study found that most factors influencing entrepreneurship growth were significant, recommending enhanced training, financial support, and ongoing monitoring for greater impact (Omeje et al., 2020). Beyond skill development, mentorship fosters confidence and resilience, enabling women entrepreneurs to challenge societal norms and redefine success in their communities. Empirical evidence highlights the impact of successful mentorship initiatives, which have been linked to increased revenue generation, expanded market reach, and improved sustainability of female-owned businesses in Nigeria (Al Omoush, 2024). Such programs are indispensable for empowering women and driving inclusive economic growth in Nigeria (Gakhar, 2024; Seyfi et al., 2025).

This systematic review aims to critically examine the influence of mentorship on the growth of female entrepreneurship in Nigeria. It seeks to identify the mentorship models implemented for female entrepreneurs in the country, evaluate the effectiveness of these programs in addressing the barriers faced by Nigerian women entrepreneurs, and propose actionable recommendations for optimizing mentorship programs as a tool for empowerment by providing a comprehensive analysis of existing evidence. This study contributes significantly to the growing body of knowledge on gender-focused entrepreneurship. The findings will benefit multiple stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, non-governmental organizations, and business leaders by

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offering practical insights into strategies that can enhance the economic participation of women in Nigeria. For female entrepreneurs, the study highlights opportunities for leveraging mentorship to overcome challenges and achieve sustainable growth. Ultimately, this research would drive social inclusion, gender equality, and economic advancement within Nigeria's entrepreneurial landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section integrates relevant theoretical frameworks to articulate the conceptual relationships between mentorship, gender, and entrepreneurship. This review clarifies the "what," "how," and "why" of mentorship's influence on female entrepreneurship and identifies key tensions and gaps in existing research by drawing upon Institutional Theory, Legitimacy Theory, and Social Learning Theory.

Institutional Theory and Female Entrepreneurship

Institutional Theory (Bendig et al., 2024; Malmström et al., 2024) explains how formal and informal structures shape entrepreneurial behaviour. In Nigeria, women entrepreneurs operate in a constrained institutional environment characterized by rigid gender norms, limited financial access, and systemic biases (Simba et al., 2024). These institutional barriers hinder women from fully participating in entrepreneurship, creating a need for mentorship as an alternative support mechanism. Mentorship helps women navigate these institutional constraints by providing them with non-traditional pathways to acquiring business knowledge, networks, and credibility (Ogbari et al., 2024; Turley et al., 2024).

Legitimacy Processes in Female Entrepreneurship

Legitimacy Theory (Donbesuur et al., 2022; Blanco-González et al., 2023; Essers et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024) posits that entrepreneurs must establish legitimacy to gain access to resources, customers, and investment. Female entrepreneurs in Nigeria often struggle with perceived legitimacy due to cultural expectations and gender stereotypes. Mentorship can serve as a means of enhancing entrepreneurial legitimacy by equipping women with the skills, knowledge, and connections necessary to position their businesses as credible and competitive. Furthermore, mentorship fosters social capital, enabling women entrepreneurs to gain acceptance within professional and financial networks that may otherwise be difficult to access (Bullough et al., 2022; Ogbari et al., 2024).

Social Learning Theory and the Role of Mentorship

Social Learning Theory (Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2022) underscores the importance of learning through observation, imitation, and modeling. Mentorship provides female entrepreneurs with access to experienced role models, allowing them to develop essential business competencies through guided learning. This theory explains how mentees can adopt successful entrepreneurial behaviors, enhance their self-efficacy, and improve decision-making skills by engaging with mentors who have successfully navigated similar challenges (Lall et al., 2023; Nuis et al., 2023; Yitshaki, 2024).

Identifying Gaps and Tensions in Existing Research

While existing literature acknowledges the importance of mentorship in female entrepreneurship, key gaps remain:

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Limited Empirical Studies on Mentorship's Long-Term Impact: Most studies focus on short-term benefits, with little research on how mentorship contributes to sustainable business growth for women.

Lack of Context-Specific Analysis: Much of the existing research applies generalized models of mentorship, failing to account for cultural and institutional variations in Nigeria.

Limited Examination of Mentor-Mentee Dynamics: Few studies explore the challenges faced by both mentors and mentees in navigating the mentorship relationship, including mismatched expectations and socioeconomic barriers.

This review contributes to the literature by addressing these gaps and demonstrating how mentorship functions as an institutional support mechanism, a legitimacy-enhancing tool, and a pathway for entrepreneurial learning. Applying these theoretical perspectives, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the transformative role of mentorship in overcoming gendered barriers to entrepreneurship in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Search Strategy

A systematic review approach was adopted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency and replicability (Moher et al., 2009). A comprehensive search was conducted across Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and case studies. The following keywords were used: "female entrepreneurship," "mentorship," "empowerment," "Nigeria," "women in business," and "gender equality." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to refine searches and ensure inclusivity.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological rigor:

Inclusion criteria: Studies published between 2020 and 2024 to maintain relevance to contemporary mentorship trends. Studies explicitly addressing the role of mentorship in supporting female entrepreneurs in Nigeria. Peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and case studies with a clear methodological approach. Quantitative and qualitative studies measuring business growth, skill acquisition, networking, and empowerment.

Exclusion criteria: Studies that do not focus on Nigeria or provide a generalized perspective on female entrepreneurship without a mentorship component. Articles older than 2020 that do not reflect recent developments in mentorship programs. Papers lacking empirical evidence or not published in reputable, peer-reviewed sources.

Study Selection and Data Screening

A total of 101 articles were initially identified. Duplicates were removed, and titles and abstracts were screened for relevance. A further full-text review of 45 articles was conducted, leading to the final inclusion of 17 studies that met all the selection criteria. The selection process was independently verified by two researchers to reduce bias, following PRISMA recommendations.

Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis

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Key data were extracted from each study using a structured coding framework that categorized findings under six themes:

Women's Empowerment and Entrepreneurship: Impact of mentorship on business ownership and leadership skills.

Barriers to Women's Success: Challenges such as financial exclusion, cultural biases, and gender-based discrimination.

Policy and Institutional Support: The role of government and private sector initiatives in enhancing mentorship effectiveness.

Social Empowerment and Sustainable Development: The broader societal impact of female entrepreneurship mentorship programs.

Gender and Technology: How digital mentorship platforms facilitate entrepreneurial growth.

Regional and Cultural Contexts: Differences in mentorship effectiveness across various regions in Nigeria.

Analytical Framework

A thematic synthesis approach (Purssell & Gould, 2021) was applied to integrate findings across studies. Each study was coded systematically, and emerging patterns were grouped into broader themes. An iterative constant comparison method was employed to ensure reliability and consistency in the thematic categorization. Studies were assessed for quality using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist to ensure robustness in evidence synthesis. Adopting these methodological improvements, this systematic review enhances transparency, rigor, and replicability, addressing the concerns raised regarding selection criteria, coding procedures, and analytical synthesis (Carmona et al., 2023; Shaheen et al., 2023).

RESULTS

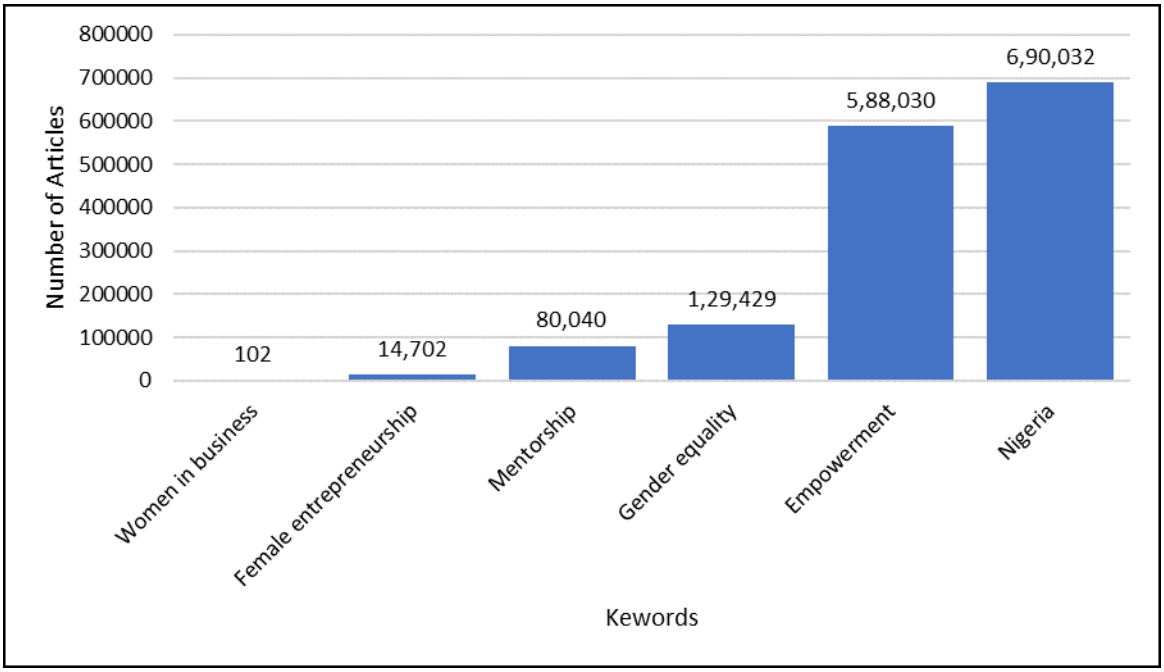


Figure 1. Keyword Search 2020 - 2024

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There are a total of 1,502,335 articles with any of the above keywords. However, when the key words were combined, further search shows 101 results for combined strings ("female entrepreneurship" & "mentorship" & "empowerment" & "Nigeria" & "women in business" & "gender equality"). Out of these 101 results, articles that were not peer reviewed were screened out leaving only 17 publications that are published in journals or book chapter. The 17 articles are then studied and summarized as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Review of relevant articles

S/N	Authors	Title	Report
1	Ojelabi, E., & Nnebue, W. (2022).	The role of career mentorship in overcoming challenges facing female construction professionals: A Nigerian perspective.	Ojelabi and Nnebue (2022) reported that female underrepresentation in Nigeria's construction sector persists due to challenges like hostile work environments and work-life conflicts. Their study, involving 78 respondents from related professions, found that 85.7% credited career mentorship for their engagement and progress, highlighting its role in enhancing women's participation and career advancement.
2	Nwakanma, A.P. (2021).	Women, Entrepreneurship, and Economic Development in Africa.	Nwakanma (2021) reported that Africa's development agenda is shifting from dependency to recognizing the transformative role of its people in economic growth. It discussed how women's empowerment initiatives, particularly in financial access and entrepreneurship, are crucial for inclusive growth. It highlighted both micro and macro-level interventions and explored how these efforts intersect to foster economic development.
3	Adam, R., & Njogu, L. (2023).	A review of gender inequality and women's empowerment in aquaculture using the reach-benefit-empower-transform framework approach:	Adam and Njogu (2023) highlighted gender inequality in Nigeria's aquaculture sector, where women are concentrated in lower-profit nodes. Despite some progress in empowerment, transformation remains limited. They recommend creating gender-equal policies, collecting sex-disaggregated data, and expanding the reach-benefit-

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S/N	Authors	Title	Report
		A case study of Nigeria.	empower-transform framework to evaluate development programs.
4	Akinnuoye, R. O., & Onuoha, B. C. (2023).	Women entrepreneurship and family business management in Rivers State, Nigeria.	Akinnuoye and Onuoha (2023) reported that women entrepreneurship and family business management are essential for economic growth in Rivers State, Nigeria. They highlighted challenges women face in family business leadership and emphasized the role of government and NGOs in offering supportive policies, capacity-building, and mentorship to foster inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems and gender diversity.
5	Nkamnebe, O. E. (2023).	Nigeria's microfinance policy and poverty reduction among female micro-entrepreneurs: Challenges and strategic options.	Nkamnebe (2023) reported that Nigeria's microfinance policy plays a vital role in alleviating poverty among female micro-entrepreneurs, yet challenges such as limited financial access, sociocultural barriers, and inadequate skills hinder their empowerment. The paper proposed strategies like enhancing financial literacy, improving access to services, and fostering government collaboration to address these issues, emphasizing the importance of policy reforms for gender equality and economic growth.
6	Ahmetaj, B., Demneri Kruja, A., & Hysa, E. (2023).	Women Entrepreneurship: Challenges and Perspectives of an Emerging Economy	Ahmetaj et al. (2023) reported that women entrepreneurship, vital for developing economies, demands further analysis in varied cultural contexts. Their study in Tirana, Albania, surveyed 36 female entrepreneurs, highlighting family support and inheritance as key factors influencing business growth, alongside challenges like discrimination. Recommendations for policy improvements were also provided.
7	Kivalya, N. Y., & Caballero-	Understanding the dimensions of women entrepreneurs'	Kivalya and Caballero-Montes (2024) conducted a systematic review of 87 empirical studies on microfinance's impact

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S/N	Authors	Title	Report
	Montes, T. (2024).	empowerment: A systematic review of the microfinance literature and avenues for research.	on empowering women entrepreneurs. They found that empowerment is shaped by normative, cognitive, and regulative factors. The authors suggested future research should focus on geographical, service, and methodological diversity to enhance understanding and improve microfinance strategies for women entrepreneurs.
8	Ogbari, M. E., Folorunso, F., Simon-Ilogho, B., Adebayo, O., Olanrewaju, K., Efegbudu, J., & Omoregbe, M. (2024).	Social Empowerment and Its Effect on Poverty Alleviation for Sustainable Development among Women Entrepreneurs in the Nigerian Agricultural Sector.	Ogbari et al. (2024) found that social empowerment significantly reduces poverty among women in Nigeria's agricultural sector. The study, using SEM-PLS analysis, emphasized the need for collaboration, resource support, and policies promoting women's empowerment to foster sustainable farming practices and economic growth in the sector.
9	Ramos Farroñán, E. V., Arbulú Ballesteros, M. A., Mogollón García, F. S., Heredia Llatas, F. D., Farfán Chilicaus, G. C., Guzmán Valle, M. d. l. Á., García Juárez, H. D., Silva León, P. M., & Arbulú Castillo, J. C. (2024).	Sustainability and Rural Empowerment: Developing Women's Entrepreneurial Skills Through Innovation.	Ramos Farroñán et al. (2024) did a systematic study on rural women entrepreneurs in the artisanal sector and identified key success factors and barriers. The research found that digital technologies and social innovation promote success, while traditional gender roles, poor infrastructure, and discrimination hinder progress. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these challenges, highlighting the need for holistic support to empower women and foster sustainable community development.
10	Ajiva, O. A., Ejike, O. G., & Abhulimen, A. O. (2024).	Empowering female entrepreneurs in the creative sector: Overcoming barriers and strategies for long-term success.	Ajiva et al. (2024) reported that female entrepreneurs in the creative sector face challenges such as financial constraints, gender bias, and inadequate policies. They proposed strategies like alternative funding, mentorship, and targeted training. The study emphasized policy support and suggested

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S/N	Authors	Title	Report
			future research on technology's role and long-term entrepreneurial outcomes.
11	Odusanya, O. E. S., & Onibon, M. G. (2024).	Embracing Entrepreneurship towards Poverty Reduction among Women in Nigeria.	Odusanya and Onibon (2024) reported that despite Nigerian women's increasing entrepreneurial roles, poverty among them continues to rise. They emphasized the need for enhanced female participation in business to combat poverty and recommended accessible financial tools, effective funding strategies, and government initiatives to promote female leadership and entrepreneurship.
12	Dabor, R. O., & Oseremen, E. (2024).	Women attributes and performance of small- and medium-scale enterprises in Nigeria.	Dabor and Oseremen (2024) reported that female characteristics significantly impact the performance of women-owned SMEs in Edo State. Their study found positive effects of age and education but negative influences of marital status and family commitments. They recommended balancing domestic and business roles to enhance organizational performance among female entrepreneurs.
13	Oseghale, I., Jirgi, A., Ibrahim, F., Ogaji, A., Ojo, A., Bako, R., & Sallawu, H. (2024).	Assessment of the economic empowerment of women before and after establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).	Oseghale et al. (2024) reported that gender significantly influences economic and social dynamics, with varying impacts across ECOWAS countries. Their analysis of Women, Business, and the Law Index scores (1970–2021) revealed notable advancements in Burkina Faso and Cape Verde but minimal progress in Nigeria and Gambia. They recommended policies promoting parental leave and equal pay.
14	Shaimemanya, T. N., Mayom Lueth, M. D., Nagen, K., Ramakhula, T., Ndi, S. E., & Hassan, M. (2024).	Breaking the digital gender divide in East and West Africa.	Shaimemanya et al. (2024) discussed the significant digital gender gap in Africa, emphasizing factors such as affordability, limited content, and digital literacy gaps. They highlighted collaborative efforts by the African Union and European Union, including the 'D4D Hub,' to address the

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S/N	Authors	Title	Report
			issue and promote gender equality in the tech sector.
15	Idris, Z., & Dogo, Z. S. (2024).	Entrepreneurial networking and the performance of women entrepreneurs in North Eastern Nigeria: The role of entrepreneurial ecosystem.	Idris and Dogo (2024) reported that entrepreneurial networking significantly influences the performance of women entrepreneurs in northeastern Nigeria, moderated by the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Using survey data from 169 women entrepreneurs, the study highlighted the importance of mentorship, strategic partnerships, and personal development. They recommended comprehensive surveys and longitudinal studies to explore mentorship's long-term impact.
16	Oarhe, D. A., Ofurum, C. O., & Oshi, J. E. O. (2024).	The role of training and development in women entrepreneur empowerment in SMEs, Rivers State.	Oarhe et al. (2024) reported that their study examined the relationship between training and development in empowering women entrepreneurs in SMEs in Rivers State. Using a survey of 97 participants and Pearson correlation analysis, the findings revealed a significant positive link between mentoring, role-play, and economic and cultural empowerment.
17	Peter, W., & Orser, B. (2024).	Women entrepreneurs in rural Nigeria: formal versus informal credit schemes.	Peter and Orser (2024) explored why low-wealth women entrepreneurs in rural Nigeria prefer informal, community-based lending over mobile-enabled credit and government microfinance. The study found that trust, flexibility, and autonomy made Esusu more attractive. It highlighted the need for gender-sensitive interventions to improve access to formal credit and support women entrepreneurs.

Table 1 shows that the common themes across these 17 papers include:

Women's Empowerment and Entrepreneurship: Several studies emphasize the importance of empowering women through entrepreneurship, particularly in sectors like agriculture, aquaculture, and the creative industry, as a means to foster economic development and reduce poverty.

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Barriers to Women's Success: A recurring theme is the challenges women face in entrepreneurship, such as gender bias, financial constraints, lack of support, and limited access to resources, including technology and education.

Policy and Institutional Support: Many papers highlight the need for gender-inclusive policies, institutional support, and access to financial resources to help women entrepreneurs succeed. Examples include microfinance and government initiatives that promote equal opportunities for women.

Social Empowerment and Sustainable Development: A focus on social empowerment, especially in rural and agricultural sectors, and its role in poverty alleviation is common. Studies suggest that supporting women socially and economically can lead to sustainable development.

Gender and Technology: The digital divide is another key issue discussed in these papers, with many studies addressing the challenges women face in accessing technology, digital literacy, and how this affects their participation in business and entrepreneurship.

Regional and Cultural Contexts: Several papers explore how women's empowerment and entrepreneurship are shaped by cultural, regional, and national factors, particularly in Africa and emerging economies. They stress the need for context-specific approaches to addressing gender disparities in entrepreneurship.

These themes collectively highlight the multifaceted challenges women face in entrepreneurship and the critical need for tailored solutions to foster gender equality and economic development through mentoring.

Mentorship Models for Female Entrepreneurs

Mentorship models for female entrepreneurs in Nigeria are diverse, ranging from one-on-one mentorship to peer-based mentorship and group mentoring programs. Some studies highlighted government-led mentorship initiatives, such as those implemented by the Bank of Industry and the Nigeria Women’s Trust Fund. Others focused on non-governmental organizations and private sector-led mentorship programs, which often provided more personalized and industry-specific support.

One-on-one mentorship was found to be the most impactful in terms of business growth, as it provided tailored advice that addressed the unique needs of individual entrepreneurs. Peer mentorship helped female entrepreneurs build solidarity and collective knowledge-sharing, fostering collaboration rather than competition.

Impact of Mentorship on Entrepreneurial Growth

The mentorship programs reviewed contributed significantly to business growth among female entrepreneurs in Nigeria. Several studies documented increases in revenue, expansion into new markets, and enhanced business sustainability. One study reported a 30% increase in profitability among women who participated in a mentorship program compared to their non-mentored counterparts.

Mentorship also played a vital role in building confidence and developing entrepreneurial skills. For many female entrepreneurs, especially those operating in male-dominated sectors, mentorship provided a safe space to ask questions and develop business strategies. Additionally, mentees

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gained access to networks and resources that would have otherwise been unavailable, helping them secure funding, partnerships, and market access.

4.3 Barriers to Effective Mentorship

Despite the positive outcomes, several barriers hindered the effectiveness of mentorship programs for female entrepreneurs in Nigeria. Cultural norms and gender biases remain significant challenges, particularly in conservative regions where women are less likely to engage in formal business networks or mentorship programs.

In addition, limited access to technology posed a challenge for women in rural areas, who were unable to participate in digital mentorship platforms. The lack of standardized mentorship frameworks also led to inconsistencies in mentorship quality, with some mentors lacking the necessary skills or commitment to support their mentees effectively.

Mentorship and Female Entrepreneurship in Nigeria

Mentorship plays a pivotal role in addressing the various obstacles hindering female entrepreneurship in Nigeria, as identified in the reviewed studies. Some of the primary challenges women entrepreneurs face include restricted access to financial resources, cultural and societal biases, inadequate business networks, and a lack of formal education and training. Mentorship can serve as a strategic intervention to overcome these barriers by offering women entrepreneurs the guidance, support, and resources they need to thrive.

Addressing Key Obstacles through Mentorship

Limited Access to Financial Resources: Many female entrepreneurs in Nigeria struggle with securing financial support due to discriminatory lending practices and a lack of collateral. Mentors can help bridge this gap by providing financial literacy training, connecting mentees with potential investors, and guiding them through grant application processes. Additionally, mentors can advocate for mentees within financial institutions to improve their access to credit and funding opportunities.

Cultural and Societal Biases: Societal expectations and cultural norms often restrict women's participation in entrepreneurship. Mentorship can empower women by offering role models who have successfully navigated these challenges, providing mentees with the confidence to challenge stereotypes. Mentors can also equip women with strategies to balance societal expectations with their entrepreneurial ambitions, fostering resilience and determination.

Inadequate Business Networks: Female entrepreneurs often lack access to robust business networks that can provide essential market linkages and business opportunities. Mentorship programs facilitate access to broader networks, enabling mentees to establish valuable relationships with industry stakeholders, suppliers, and potential clients. This connectivity can enhance market access and business expansion prospects.

Lack of Formal Education and Training: Many women entrepreneurs have limited exposure to formal business education, hindering their ability to effectively manage and scale their enterprises. Mentorship provides practical, hands-on learning experiences that focus on critical areas such as business planning, marketing strategies, and financial management. Tailored mentorship programs can thus equip women with the necessary skills to build sustainable businesses.

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Challenges Faced by Mentors and Mentees

Despite its benefits, the mentorship relationship is not without challenges. Some of the common difficulties include:

Mismatched Expectations: Mentees may expect immediate results, while mentors might emphasize long-term growth. Clear goal-setting and expectation management at the outset can help align both parties and ensure productive engagements.

Time Constraints: Both mentors and mentees may struggle with time commitments, particularly women entrepreneurs juggling multiple responsibilities. Flexible mentorship models, such as virtual mentoring and peer mentoring, can address this challenge by offering greater accessibility.

Lack of Structured MentorshipPrograms: Inconsistent mentorship experiences can arise from a lack of standardized frameworks. Establishing national mentorship guidelines and best practices can enhance the quality and effectiveness of mentorship programs.

Socioeconomic Barriers: Women in rural areas may face additional barriers such as limited access to technology and transportation. Mentorship programs should incorporate solutions such as mobile-based mentorship and community-based support groups to cater to these unique needs.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the significant role of mentorship in overcoming barriers to female entrepreneurship in Nigeria. However, to fully understand mentorship's impact, it is essential to situate our findings within broader theoretical frameworks, particularly institutional barriers, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and legitimacy processes.

Mentorship and Gendered Institutional Structures: Institutional theory suggests that entrepreneurs operate within formal and informal institutional constraints that shape their access to resources and legitimacy. In Nigeria, gendered institutional structures impose significant restrictions on female entrepreneurs, limiting their access to financial capital, markets, and professional networks. Mentorship serves as an adaptive mechanism, helping women navigate these institutional barriers by providing alternative access to social and economic capital. However, mentorship can also reinforce existing power hierarchies if it remains confined within male-dominated business networks where women are positioned as passive beneficiaries rather than active change agents.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystems and the Role of Mentorship: Entrepreneurial ecosystems theory emphasizes the interdependent factors that enable entrepreneurship, including cultural attitudes, government policies, and financial systems. The findings suggest that mentorship enhances women's participation in the entrepreneurial ecosystem by fostering business acumen, confidence, and resource access. However, mentorship programs must be designed to go beyond individual-level support, addressing systemic gaps such as policy constraints and unequal access to investment opportunities. Without structural interventions, mentorship alone may be insufficient to dismantle the entrenched inequalities within the ecosystem.

Legitimacy Processes and Women Entrepreneurs: Legitimacy theory highlights that entrepreneurs must establish credibility to secure financial and social support. Female entrepreneurs often struggle with legitimacy due to deep-seated gender biases that question their

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ability to lead and sustain businesses. Mentorship can play a transformative role by enhancing women's legitimacy through network expansion, knowledge sharing, and increased visibility in the business sector. However, if mentorship programs lack inclusivity or fail to challenge existing biases, they risk perpetuating rather than disrupting gendered legitimacy hierarchies.

Mentorship as a Reproducer or Disruptor of Power Hierarchies: A critical examination of mentorship reveals its dual role in either reinforcing or dismantling existing power structures within Nigeria's business landscape. When mentorship is structured to be top-down, with mentors primarily from male-dominated sectors, it may reproduce hierarchical dependencies, positioning women as subordinate entrepreneurs. Conversely, mentorship that encourages peer-to-peer learning, female-led networks, and policy advocacy can act as a disruptor, challenging traditional power relations and fostering a more equitable entrepreneurial environment. The extent to which mentorship transforms or maintains these hierarchies depends on how mentorship programs are structured, the representation of female mentors, and the integration of policy-level support.

Moving Beyond Description to a Theory-Driven Contribution: This study extends existing theories on gender and entrepreneurship by demonstrating that mentorship is not merely a supportive tool but a structural intervention that can either sustain or challenge institutionalized gender barriers. Situating mentorship within entrepreneurial ecosystems and legitimacy processes, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how mentorship interacts with systemic inequalities. Future research should further investigate how different mentorship models influence power dynamics and explore policy-level interventions that ensure mentorship serves as a transformative rather than a reinforcing mechanism for gender equity in entrepreneurship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this review, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the influence of mentorship on the growth of female entrepreneurship in Nigeria:

Develop Structured Mentorship Frameworks: Establishing clear guidelines on mentorship duration, expectations, and measurable outcomes can help create consistency and reliability in mentorship experiences.

Standardize Mentorship Programs: Establish a national framework for mentorship programs that sets clear guidelines for mentor-mentee relationships, including expectations, duration, and outcomes.

Promote Digital Mentorship Platforms: Invest in digital tools to facilitate remote mentorship, especially for female entrepreneurs in rural areas with limited access to business networks. Utilizing online mentorship platforms can expand reach and accessibility, especially for women in remote areas, ensuring wider participation and impact.

Cultural Sensitization Campaigns: Implement campaigns to challenge gender biases and encourage community acceptance of women in entrepreneurship and formal mentorship programs.

Encourage Public-Private Partnerships: Foster collaborations between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector to expand the reach and impact of mentorship programs.

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Capacity Building for Mentors: Training mentors on gender-sensitive approaches and effective mentorship techniques can enhance their ability to support female entrepreneurs effectively.
Monitor and Evaluate Mentorship Outcomes: Develop robust monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the long-term impact of mentorship on business growth, with a focus on scaling successful mentorship models.
Public-Private Partnerships: Collaborations between government agencies, private sector actors, and non-governmental organizations can ensure adequate funding and scalability of mentorship programs.

CONCLUSION

This study outlined the critical role of mentorship in addressing the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that mentorship programs significantly contribute to overcoming barriers such as financial constraints, cultural biases, and limited business networks by providing tailored support and guidance. However, the effectiveness of these programs is contingent on addressing challenges such as mismatched expectations, inadequate resources, and socioeconomic barriers. Thus, developing structured mentorship frameworks, leveraging digital platforms, and fostering public-private collaborations, mentorship can be optimized as a powerful tool for empowering women entrepreneurs. Future efforts should focus on creating inclusive policies and innovative strategies that ensure the sustainability and scalability of mentorship programs, ultimately fostering economic growth and gender equality in Nigeria.

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