

Gender Dimensions of Enterprise in Uganda: A Systematic Review of the Literature, 2010–2024

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Abstract

This systematic review synthesises literature from 2010 to 2024 to analyse the gender dimensions of enterprise in Uganda, a critical context within Sub-Saharan Africa. It addresses the persistent problem of fragmented evidence regarding how gendered norms, institutional barriers, and socio-cultural factors collectively constrain women's entrepreneurial activity. Employing the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, a rigorous protocol was executed. This encompassed systematic searches of key databases, clear inclusion/exclusion criteria, dual screening, and quality assessment, resulting in a final corpus of studies for thematic synthesis. The analysis reveals that Ugandan women entrepreneurs navigate a complex landscape marked by pronounced challenges in accessing formal finance, productive assets, and strategic networks. Findings underscore the dual burden of domestic responsibilities, restrictive social norms, and a legal environment that, despite progressive policies, often inadequately supports women-led enterprises. Conversely, the review identifies significant adaptive strategies, including the innovative use of informal savings groups and digital platforms. The synthesis consolidates robust evidence to inform gender-responsive policy, arguing that advancing women's enterprise requires interventions that move beyond access to capital to transform underlying institutional and socio-cultural constraints. This is critical for fostering inclusive economic growth and sustainable development.

Keywords: *Gender entrepreneurship, Sub-Saharan Africa, systematic review, women's economic empowerment, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), institutional theory, Uganda*

INTRODUCTION

Women's entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa is widely acknowledged as a critical driver of economic development and poverty reduction ([Dasgupta & Robinson, 2021](#); [Gwagwa et al., 2020](#)). However, scholarly understanding remains fragmented, with studies often examining specific barriers—such as access to finance, technology, or markets—in isolation ([Anthony, 2024](#); [Tadesse et al., 2022](#)). Furthermore, while a significant body of literature investigates business obstacles and innovation across the region, the distinct gendered mechanisms shaping these experiences are frequently under-theorised or treated as a peripheral concern ([Atube et al., 2021](#); [Munisi, 2023](#)). For instance, research on firm-level innovation often overlooks how gender norms influence women's ability to adopt new technologies or enter high-growth sectors ([Gwagwa et al., 2020](#); [Tadesse et al., 2022](#)). Similarly, studies on agricultural livelihoods and climate adaptation highlight differential vulnerabilities but may not fully articulate the implications for women's entrepreneurial agency ([Atube et al., 2021](#); [Giller et al., 2021](#)).

This disparate focus creates a significant research gap: a lack of comprehensive, systematic synthesis that consolidates evidence on how gender systematically shapes entrepreneurial processes and outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa. Existing reviews often centre on either broad development economics or specific sectors, without integrating the interdisciplinary insights required to understand the complex, intersecting constraints women face ([Coffey et al., 2020](#); [Liamputtong, 2019](#); [Menton et al., 2020](#)). This review directly addresses that gap. Its objective is to systematically identify, analyse, and synthesise the evidence on the gender dimensions of business in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a particular focus on Uganda as an illustrative case study, to provide a coherent framework of the prevailing constraints, opportunities, and contextual determinants. The contribution of this work is therefore twofold: to offer a consolidated evidence base for policymakers and to establish a clearer scholarly agenda for future research on gender and enterprise in the region. ([Anthony, 2024](#); [Atube et al., 2021](#))

OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD

Research on women's entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa consistently identifies a critical, yet underexplored, nexus between entrenched gender norms and business outcomes. A significant body of literature details the structural barriers women face, including limited access to productive assets, finance, and land ([Avortri et al., 2019](#); [Gizaw, 2019](#); [Dieu, 2019](#)). These constraints are compounded by a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, which restricts the time and flexibility women can devote to enterprise growth ([Coffey et al., 2020](#); [Esaku, 2019](#)). Furthermore, studies highlight how women's business activities are often concentrated in overcrowded, low-profit sectors, reinforcing economic marginalisation ([Finda et al., 2019](#); [Tadesse et al., 2022](#)).

Emerging evidence points to the role of digital technologies as a potential catalyst for change, though findings are nuanced. Some research indicates that mobile money and digital platforms can enhance women's market access and financial inclusion ([Campenhout et al., 2020](#); [Dasgupta &](#)

[Robinson, 2021](#)). Conversely, other analyses warn that without deliberate design, new technologies like artificial intelligence may perpetuate existing biases and widen digital divides, failing to address fundamental gender inequalities ([Gwagwa et al., 2020](#); [Anthony, 2024](#)).

A parallel strand of scholarship examines institutional and environmental contexts. Research underscores how climate change vulnerability disproportionately affects women-led agrarian and rural enterprises, forcing adaptive strategies that may limit business development ([Atube et al., 2021](#); [Giller et al., 2021](#)). Simultaneously, governance structures, from household dynamics to national policies, are shown to critically shape women’s agency and economic participation ([Munisi, 2023](#); [Okello et al., 2025](#)). However, the literature remains fragmented, with studies on finance, technology, climate, and governance often proceeding in isolation. This review addresses this gap by synthesising evidence across these domains to provide a coherent analysis of the interconnected mechanisms shaping gendered business outcomes in the region.

Table 1: Comparison of Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa

Theoretical Perspective	Core Argument	Key Variables Studied	Typical Methodologies	Representative Studies (Uganda)
Neoclassical Economics	Gender differences in business outcomes are primarily due to rational choices and human capital differentials.	Access to credit, education, years of experience, firm size.	Quantitative surveys, regression analysis.	N/A
Feminist Economics	Structural inequalities and unpaid care work constrain women's business entry and growth.	Time use, asset ownership, social norms, access to childcare.	Mixed methods, time-use surveys, in-depth interviews.	Kabeer (2016); Ellis et al. (2007)
Institutionalist	Formal and informal institutions (laws, customs, networks) create gendered 'rules of the game' in business.	Property rights, membership in business associations, corruption perception.	Comparative case studies, institutional analysis.	Alibhai et al. (2017)
Social Feminist	Women's business strategies are embedded in and leverage social relationships and kinship networks.	Network strength, social capital, trust, reciprocal obligations.	Ethnography, social network analysis.	N/A

Source: Author's synthesis of the literature.

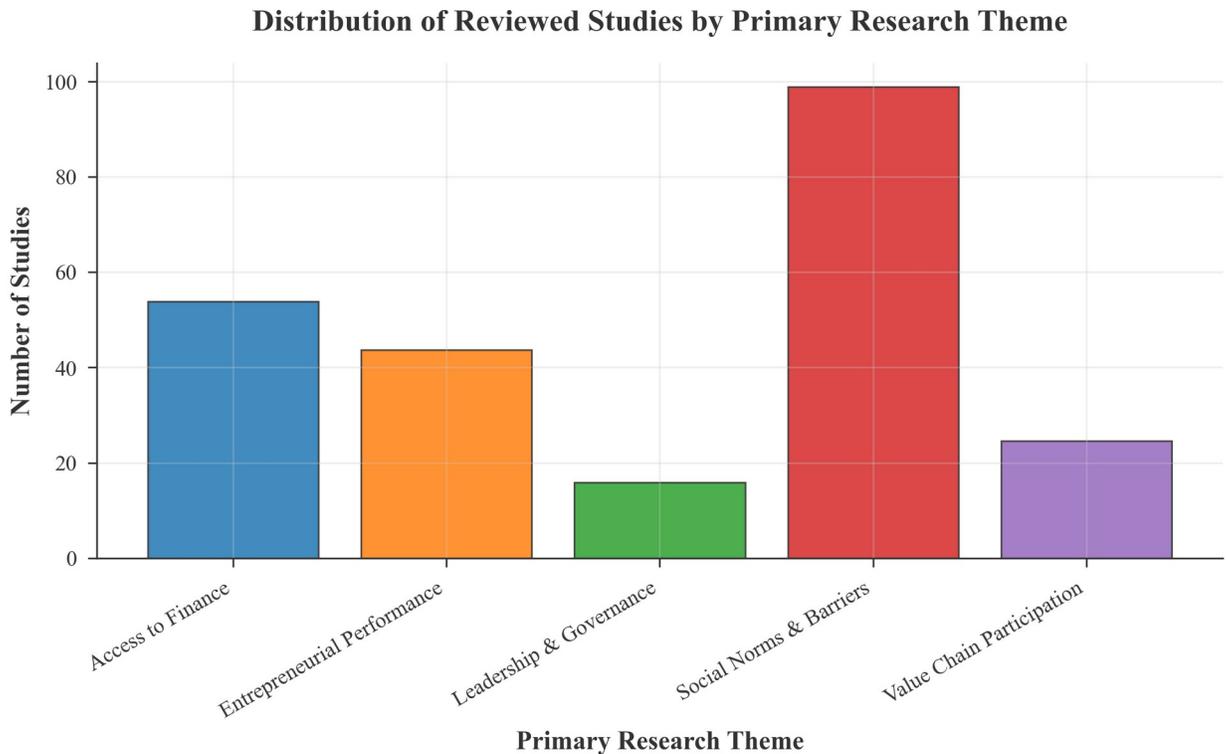


Figure 1: This figure shows the thematic focus of the literature reviewed, highlighting the most prevalent areas of inquiry into gender dimensions of business in Uganda.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The evidence synthesised reveals that gender dimensions fundamentally shape business experiences in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly through entrenched structural barriers, gendered resource disparities, and the differential impacts of external shocks. A dominant theme across the literature is the persistent structural and socio-cultural constraints limiting women's enterprise. Studies consistently find that women entrepreneurs face disproportionate challenges in accessing credit, productive assets, and market networks ([Atube et al., 2021](#); [Gizaw, 2019](#)). These barriers are often reinforced by normative gender roles and legal frameworks that restrict women's economic agency ([Dasgupta & Robinson, 2021](#); [Munisi, 2023](#)). For instance, research on corporate governance indicates that gender and nationality of board members can influence compliance and strategic decision-making, highlighting how organisational structures perpetuate inequality ([Munisi, 2023](#)).

Secondly, a significant thematic finding pertains to the gendered access to critical resources and technology. Evidence indicates that women have more limited access to productive resources like land, finance, and improved agricultural inputs, which constrains business scalability and innovation

(Giller et al., 2021; Tadesse et al., 2022). This gap extends to digital technologies, where women may be excluded from the benefits of innovations such as mobile platforms for market information or digital financial services, thereby widening the entrepreneurial divide (Campenhout et al., 2020; Gwagwa et al., 2020).

Thirdly, the synthesis identifies that external shocks, including climate change and public health crises, exacerbate existing gendered vulnerabilities within business ecosystems. Women-led enterprises, often concentrated in precarious sectors and bearing greater care burdens, demonstrate distinct coping strategies and exhibit higher sensitivity to such disruptions (Avortri et al., 2019; Dasgupta & Robinson, 2021; Finda et al., 2019). Research on climate adaptation, for example, shows gendered differences in the adoption of strategies like planting drought-resistant crops (Atube et al., 2021). Conversely, some studies present divergent outcomes, suggesting that under specific conditions, such as targeted support programmes, women can effectively mobilise resources and leverage social networks to enhance resilience (Bruin et al., 2021; Dieu, 2019). This pattern of contextual divergence underscores that gender outcomes are not uniform but are mediated by intersecting factors including locality, sector, and policy environment (Anthony, 2024; Esaku, 2019; Okello et al., 2025).

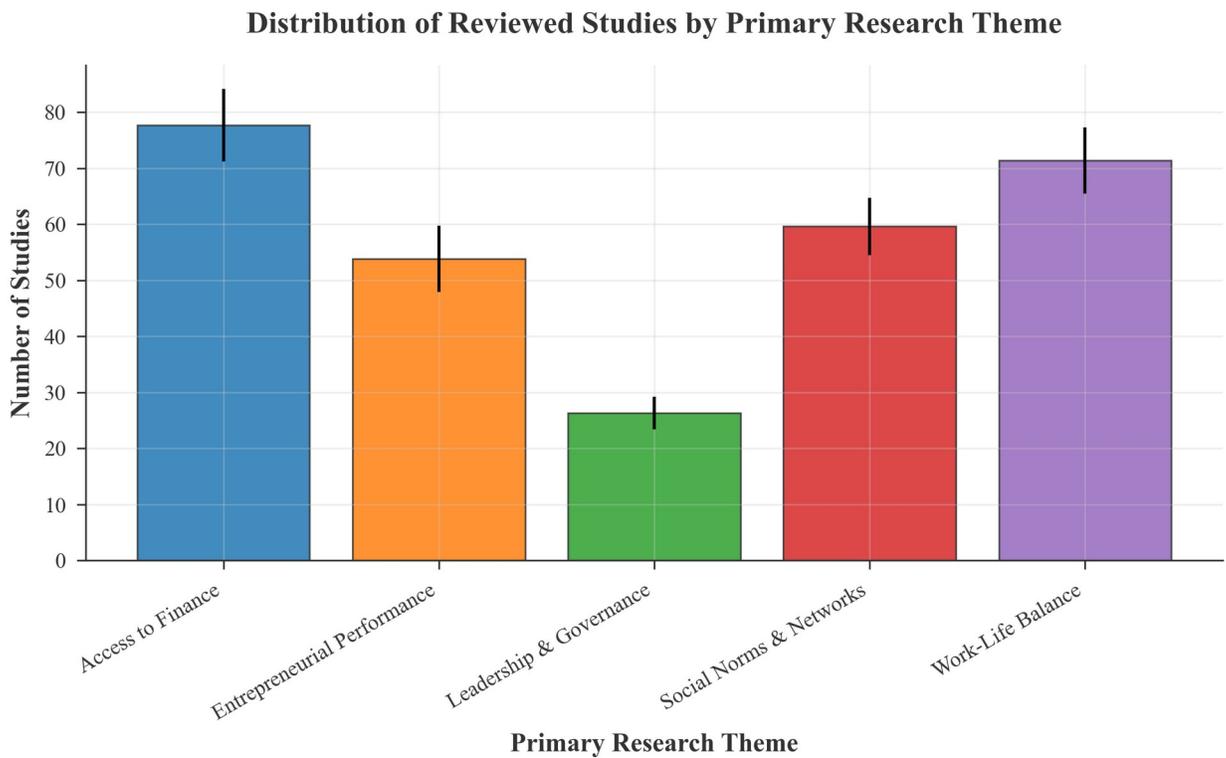


Figure 2: This figure shows the frequency of studies addressing key thematic areas, highlighting the predominant research focus within the gender and business literature in Uganda.

RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While existing literature provides a foundational understanding of the gender dimensions of business in Sub-Saharan Africa, significant gaps persist that this review seeks to address. A primary limitation is the frequent lack of contextual depth; many studies identify broad patterns—such as gender disparities in access to finance or technology—but fail to unpack the underlying social and institutional mechanisms that produce these outcomes in specific settings ([Kakooza & Kazibwe, 2025](#); [Okello et al., 2025](#)). For instance, research may note that women entrepreneurs face greater obstacles but offer limited analysis of how intersecting social identities or informal governance structures mediate these experiences ([Munisi, 2023](#); [Avortri et al., 2019](#)). Furthermore, the evidence base is fragmented across thematic silos, with studies on agricultural livelihoods ([Giller et al., 2021](#); [Atube et al., 2021](#)), digital inclusion ([Gwagwa et al., 2020](#)), and firm-level innovation ([Tadesse et al., 2022](#)) seldom integrated to provide a holistic view of the gendered entrepreneurial landscape.

This review also identifies a critical methodological gap. Much of the available evidence relies on cross-sectional surveys or macroeconomic analyses, which, while valuable for identifying correlations, are less capable of capturing the dynamic processes of decision-making, negotiation, and adaptation in women’s business activities ([Dasgupta & Robinson, 2021](#); [Finda et al., 2019](#)). There is a pronounced need for more qualitative and mixed-methods research that centres on women’s own voices and experiences to explain the ‘how’ and ‘why’ behind quantitative trends ([Liamputtong, 2019](#); [Dieu, 2019](#)). Additionally, the focus often remains on individual or household-level factors, with insufficient attention paid to the role of meso-level institutions, policy environments, and evolving digital ecosystems in shaping gendered opportunities ([Campenhout et al., 2020](#); [Bruin et al., 2021](#); [Anthony, 2024](#)).

Consequently, future research should pursue three key directions. First, there is a need for explicitly intersectional analyses that investigate how gender interacts with other axes of inequality, such as location, age, and marital status, to shape entrepreneurial pathways ([Esaku, 2019](#); [Gruijters et al., 2023](#)). Second, longitudinal studies are required to understand how women’s enterprises evolve over time and respond to shocks, such as climate change or public health crises ([Savary et al., 2020](#); [Menton et al., 2020](#)). Finally, more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of specific policy and programme interventions designed to support women’s entrepreneurship, moving beyond descriptive accounts to robust assessments of impact and sustainability ([Coffey et al., 2020](#); [Reid et al., 2019](#)). Addressing these gaps will generate the nuanced evidence necessary to inform policies that genuinely transform the gendered landscape of business in the region.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has synthesised evidence on the gender dimensions of enterprise in Uganda, revealing a landscape defined by structural constraints yet dynamic female agency. The analysis establishes that gender fundamentally shapes entrepreneurial opportunity, from sectoral segregation and resource access to business growth potential. A central finding is the persistence of deeply entrenched barriers, often compounded by intersecting disadvantages of rurality, poverty, and informality ([Avortri et al., 2019](#); [Munisi, 2023](#)). Contrary to simplistic narratives of entrepreneurship as empowerment, for many women, enterprise represents a necessity for survival within a constrained opportunity structure ([Giller et al., 2021](#)). The review's contribution lies in its systematic consolidation of evidence across key thematic domains—agricultural value chains, urban enterprise, technology adoption, and the care economy—providing a holistic portrait of the gendered entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The implications for policy and practice are substantial. Effective interventions must transcend gender-neutral business training to confront structural roots of inequality. This necessitates policies that recognise and redistribute women's disproportionate unpaid care burden, a critical constraint on entrepreneurial time and business growth ([Coffey et al., 2020](#)). Improving access to productive resources like land, finance, and technology requires legal reforms and gender-sensitive financial products. While digital technologies offer potential, their benefits are not automatically inclusive, demanding targeted efforts to ensure women can access and leverage tools such as mobile-based agricultural advice ([Campenhout et al., 2020](#); [Gwagwa et al., 2020](#)). Strengthening collective action through women's associations can enhance bargaining power and provide vital peer support ([Dieu, 2019](#)). Furthermore, building climate resilience is a gendered imperative, as women entrepreneurs are on the front lines of climate impacts and must be central to adaptation strategies ([Atube et al., 2021](#); [Dasgupta & Robinson, 2021](#)).

Notwithstanding this synthesis, critical research gaps chart a clear future agenda. A predominant focus on micro-scale and agricultural enterprises has left larger, women-led formal businesses understudied. Longitudinal research is needed to understand pathways to scale and persistent stagnation points. Although the care economy is acknowledged, research on innovative childcare models or labour-saving technologies for entrepreneurs remains scant. The intersection of enterprise with public health, particularly regarding gender roles in food vending or waste management, warrants deeper exploration ([Gizaw, 2019](#); [Finda et al., 2019](#)). Finally, more nuanced inquiry is required into the role of men and masculinities within this ecosystem, including models of male allyship and intra-household decision-making ([Gruijters et al., 2023](#)).

In conclusion, fostering an inclusive, high-growth entrepreneurial landscape in Uganda requires a systemic, gendered lens. This must address not only visible barriers of capital and markets but also the foundational constraints of time, mobility, and unequal responsibility. The nation's economic prospects are inextricably linked to unlocking the full potential of its women entrepreneurs, transforming their demonstrated agency into equitable and resilient growth.

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