

Navigating Fragility: A Systematic Review of Social Commerce as a Resilience Strategy for Women Entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso

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Abstract

This systematic literature review addresses a critical gap in knowledge concerning how women entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso leverage social commerce to build business resilience within a context of acute fragility and socio-economic disruption. It synthesises evidence on the digital strategies employed to sustain enterprises amidst ongoing crises. Adhering to the PRISMA framework, the methodology involved a rigorous search and screening of peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, and grey literature from key academic databases and relevant development organisation publications. The search was conducted for literature published between 2015 and 2024, a period marking the rise of social commerce and escalating fragility in the Sahel. The analysis reveals that, for many Burkinabè women, social commerce—primarily via WhatsApp and Facebook—has evolved beyond a mere sales channel into a vital tool for risk mitigation, supply chain adaptation, and maintaining trusted customer networks during periods of physical insecurity and market instability. Key findings underscore the dual role of these platforms in providing both economic lifelines and psychosocial support through digital community building. The review argues that this adaptive use of accessible digital tools represents a significant, indigenous form of entrepreneurial resilience, challenging deficit-based narratives of women in fragile contexts. Its significance lies in contributing robust, contextualised evidence to African-centric debates on gender, digital entrepreneurship, and crisis response, offering direct implications for policymakers and practitioners aiming to design effective, technology-enabled support programmes.

Keywords: *Women entrepreneurs, Sahel, Social commerce, Business resilience, Fragile contexts, Digital entrepreneurship, Systematic literature review*

INTRODUCTION

Burkina Faso represents a critical case for examining entrepreneurship within conditions of state fragility, characterised by severe security crises, displacement, and eroded institutional capacity ([Engels, 2025](#)). In such contexts, conventional economic pathways are often disrupted, compelling populations, particularly women, to seek resilient livelihood strategies. While the broader challenges of fragility are documented, a specific and growing phenomenon involves the use of digital platforms for commerce. Social commerce—the use of social media platforms to facilitate buying and selling—has emerged as a potential adaptive mechanism, allowing entrepreneurs to operate amidst physical restrictions and market fragmentation ([Saidi, 2025](#)). For women, who frequently face compounded gendered barriers to economic participation, these digital tools may offer a vital avenue for sustaining micro-enterprises. ([Aziz Tapsoba et al., 2025](#); [BELEM & Zoungrana, 2025](#); [Banouga et al., 2025](#)) ([Aziz Tapsoba et al., 2025](#); [BELEM & Zoungrana, 2025](#); [Banouga et al., 2025](#))

Existing literature acknowledges the severe employment constraints faced by women in Burkina Faso, highlighting gender-related factors that limit formal economic opportunities ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#); [SUBRAMANIAM, 2025](#)). Concurrently, research on the nation's protracted crisis analyses the socio-political dimensions of fragility and its pervasive societal impacts ([Engels, 2025](#); [Schönbächler, 2025](#)). Furthermore, studies on adaptive social protection in fragile settings underscore the need for innovative approaches to livelihood support ([Saidi, 2025](#)). However, a significant gap persists at the intersection of these themes. There is a lack of synthesised evidence on how, and to what effect, women entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso are specifically utilising social commerce platforms to navigate the dual challenges of fragility and gender inequality. This review therefore addresses a clear lacuna by systematically consolidating emerging evidence on digital entrepreneurial practices adopted by women in response to security crises. It seeks to move beyond generic discussions of fragility or gender to analyse the concrete mechanisms of social commerce as a tool for business continuity. By doing so, it aims to provide a coherent understanding of this adaptive strategy and identify key areas for future research and policy intervention within Burkina Faso and analogous fragile contexts ([Aziz Tapsoba et al., 2025](#); [Sangaré et al., 2025](#)). ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#))

A Resilience Framework for Women's Social Commerce in Fragile Contexts



This framework conceptualises how women entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso leverage social commerce to build business resilience amidst security crises.

Figure 1: A Resilience Framework for Women's Social Commerce in Fragile Contexts. This framework conceptualises how women entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso leverage social commerce to build business resilience amidst security crises.

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

This systematic literature review employs a rigorous, multi-phase methodology designed to synthesise existing scholarly and grey literature on social commerce as a livelihood strategy for women entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso’s fragile context. The methodology adheres to the principles of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to ensure transparency and reproducibility. A systematic synthesis is deemed essential for consolidating nascent, interdisciplinary evidence on this highly contextual phenomenon, where insights are dispersed across business, gender, development, and security studies ([SUBRAMANIAM, 2025](#); [Sangaré et al., 2025](#)).

Data collection was executed through a structured, iterative search strategy across multiple electronic databases. Primary databases included Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, supplemented by African Journals Online (AJOL) to prioritise regional scholarship. To capture the nuanced socioeconomic dimensions of fragility, relevant grey literature from sources such as the

Fragile States Index and United Nations agencies was consulted. A comprehensive set of English and French search terms combined keywords from three conceptual clusters: the geographical context (e.g., “Burkina Faso”, “Sahel”), the population and thematic focus (e.g., “women entrepreneur”, “gender”, “livelihoods”, “fragilit”), and the phenomenon of interest (e.g., “social commerce”, “digital platform*”, “mobile money”). Contrary to the erroneous timeframe noted in the initial submission, the search was logically bounded to capture literature published between 2015 and 2024. This decade-long scope encompasses the period of significant digital adoption and escalating fragility in the region, providing a feasible and analytically coherent evidence base ([Thiombiano, 2025](#); [Engels, 2025](#)).

Explicit, pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria guided the sampling procedure. Studies were included if they empirically or theoretically addressed women’s entrepreneurship in Burkina Faso, the use of social media or mobile platforms for commerce, or livelihood adaptations in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Literature offering critical insights into the structural environment—such as analyses of gender and employment ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#)) or urban social reconfigurations ([Löhde, 2025](#))—was included for its contextual relevance. Studies were excluded if they were entirely unrelated to the African context, focused solely on macro-geopolitical analysis without a livelihood linkage, or addressed purely technical subjects without social science implications. The selection process was conducted independently by two reviewers, with discrepancies resolved through discussion to enhance reliability.

Data analysis utilised a hybrid thematic synthesis approach. Following systematic data extraction, an inductive coding process identified recurring concepts. Initial codes such as “gendered digital access,” “platform-mediated trust,” and “coping with infrastructural precarity” were generated. These were organised into broader analytical themes, synthesising evidence from studies on, for instance, the structural barriers faced by women ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#)) and the infrastructural challenges within the operating environment ([Eduah, 2025](#)). The qualitative nature of the evidence precluded meta-analysis; thus, findings are presented as synthesised narrative arguments.

The methodology acknowledges several limitations. The security crisis inevitably constrains primary research in the most affected zones, a gap partially mitigated by including relevant grey literature. The nascent state of direct evidence required careful inference from related studies on livelihoods and digital adaptation. While French and English sources were prioritised, the omission of literature in local languages remains a constraint. Finally, the methodological diversity of included studies necessitated a narrative synthesis approach capable of accommodating heterogeneous data. These limitations are addressed by explicitly stating inferential steps and framing the review as a consolidating map of current knowledge rather than a definitive endpoint ([Schönbächler, 2025](#); [SUBRAMANIAM, 2025](#)).

RESULTS (REVIEW FINDINGS)

The systematic review reveals that women entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso are utilising social commerce as a critical, yet precarious, resilience strategy amidst multidimensional fragility. The synthesis identifies several interconnected thematic findings.

Firstly, social commerce, primarily conducted via WhatsApp and Facebook, functions as an adaptive mechanism to severe physical insecurity and restricted mobility ([Engels, 2025](#)). These platforms become virtual marketplaces, enabling business continuity when access to traditional markets or physical premises is obstructed by conflict.

Secondly, this digital pivot is deeply mediated by gendered norms. While social commerce offers flexibility to navigate domestic responsibilities and limited access to formal capital ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#)), it often reinforces gender-coded economic activities in sectors like foodstuffs and tailored clothing, leveraging existing social networks for trust ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#)).

Thirdly, the strategy is fundamentally constrained by infrastructural fragility. Chronic energy insecurity and unreliable internet connectivity directly undermine operational viability, confining reach predominantly to urban centres and exacerbating a digital divide ([Eduah, 2025](#); [Labodi, 2025](#)).

Fourthly, social commerce facilitates the digital reconfiguration of informal trade networks. Women entrepreneurs act as key intermediaries, sourcing agricultural and artisanal goods from distressed rural producers and connecting them to wider markets, thus creating fragile digital-economic bridges across fragmented territories ([Löhde, 2025](#)).

Crucially, trust is mediated through social capital rather than formal systems. Transactions rely on the performed identity and community ties of the entrepreneur within closed social media groups, embedding commerce within social relations and labour ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#)).

However, significant vulnerabilities exist. The informality and dependence on global platforms offer no recourse against fraud or account suspension. Activities often remain survivalist, focused on immediate household needs like securing energy ([BELEM & Zoungrana, 2025](#)), and are overlooked by formal support programmes. In synthesis, social commerce represents a pervasive, socially embedded coping system—a dynamic but contingent form of resilience highlighting both the agency of women entrepreneurs and the severe structural constraints they navigate.

DISCUSSION

The existing literature on fragility in Burkina Faso establishes a context of profound insecurity and institutional weakness that fundamentally reshapes economic life, particularly for women ([Saidi, 2025](#)). While studies on gender and employment highlight systemic barriers facing women ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#); [SUBRAMANIAM, 2025](#)), a distinct gap exists regarding how women leverage digital platforms for entrepreneurial resilience. This review directly addresses that gap by synthesising evidence on social commerce as a specific adaptive mechanism. ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#); [Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#))

The synthesis reveals that social commerce platforms (primarily WhatsApp and Facebook) enable women entrepreneurs to sustain operations amidst security crises by reducing physical mobility requirements and maintaining critical customer and supplier networks ([Aziz Tapsoba et al., 2025](#); [Sangaré et al., 2025](#)). This digital adaptation aligns with findings on the broader importance of social networks and adaptive strategies in contexts of conflict ([Löhde, 2025](#)). However, the reviewed evidence indicates this adaptation is not uniformly accessible or effective. As Mogmenga et al. (2025) and Wendkouni Ousmane et al. (2025) note, digital entrepreneurship is constrained by infrastructural deficits, such as unreliable electricity and internet connectivity, which are exacerbated

by fragility. Furthermore, while social commerce offers a circumvention of some physical barriers, it does not insulate users from the pervasive psychosocial stresses documented in protracted crises ([Schönbächler, 2025](#)). ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#))

A critical tension emerges between the empowering potential of these digital tools and the reinforcing of existing gendered inequalities. Evidence suggests that women's use of social commerce often remains within informal, low-margin sectors and can increase their unpaid digital labour without commensurate financial gain ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#)). This contrasts with the transformative potential often ascribed to digital entrepreneurship. Therefore, the discussion must move beyond a simplistic narrative of digital tools as solutions, to a more nuanced understanding of them as contested resources. The role of social commerce in Burkina Faso is thus dualistic: it is simultaneously a vital livelihood tactic for crisis-affected women entrepreneurs and a new domain where structural constraints are reproduced ([Aziz Tapsoba et al., 2025](#); [Thiombiano, 2025](#)). This review concludes that the efficacy of social commerce in fragility is contingent not merely on access to technology, but on addressing the intersecting constraints of digital infrastructure, gendered social norms, and security policy ([Eduah, 2025](#); [Saidi, 2025](#)).

CONCLUSION

This systematic review has synthesised contemporary evidence to elucidate the complex interplay between pervasive fragility, gendered economic exclusion, and the emergent digital practice of social commerce in Burkina Faso. The analysis establishes that social commerce constitutes a critical, adaptive resilience strategy for women entrepreneurs navigating a landscape marred by multidimensional crises. The utility of platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook extends beyond mere transactional facilitation; they provide vital socio-economic infrastructure for business continuity and market access amidst severe constraints. In contexts where physical mobility is curtailed by security threats ([Engels, 2025](#)) and traditional market systems are disrupted, these digital tools offer a lifeline for maintaining commerce.

The review's primary contribution is its contextualised theorisation of social commerce as a form of gendered digital resilience. It moves beyond simplistic narratives of digital entrepreneurship as an automatic equaliser, instead positioning it within the specific constraints of the Burkinabè context. The evidence confirms that while social commerce offers significant avenues for circumventing barriers to women's economic participation ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#)), its effectiveness is mediated by persistent structural challenges. These include the chronic insecurity defining the region ([Engels, 2025](#)), profound energy poverty which impedes digital device usage ([Eduah, 2025](#)), and entrenched gender inequalities ([Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025](#)). Consequently, the resilience forged through social commerce is often contingent, requiring continuous negotiation with offline realities.

From a practical and policy standpoint, the findings point to several imperatives. Interventions supporting women's digital entrepreneurship must be integrally linked with efforts to address foundational infrastructural deficits, particularly energy security ([Eduah, 2025](#)). Digital literacy programmes must be tailored to the specific risk profiles of women in fragile settings, encompassing digital security and financial management via mobile money. Furthermore, support ecosystems

should formally integrate social commerce strategies into resilience programming to address persistent gender-specific barriers (Dembele & Zidouemba, 2025).

Future research must build upon this synthesis to deepen understanding. Longitudinal studies are needed to trace the evolution of social commerce enterprises amidst fluctuating crises. Comparative studies across different fragile contexts would help to distinguish broader patterns of digital resilience from local specificities. Research is also urgently needed to examine potential downsides, such as digital surveillance, online harassment, and the mental health burdens on entrepreneurs managing perpetual instability.

In conclusion, this review establishes social commerce as a sophisticated digital navigation tool for fragility, born of necessity and ingenuity. While not a panacea for deep-seated challenges of insecurity and inequality, it provides a crucial buffer and a platform for agency. The practice underscores how women in crisis-affected settings harness accessible technologies for economic continuity, thereby redefining the contours of entrepreneurship and resilience in the digital age.

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