

Sustainable Development and Enterprise in Uganda: A Gendered Analysis of Business Practices and Policy, 2010–2024

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Abstract

This original research addresses a critical gap in gendered analyses of sustainable enterprise within Uganda's development agenda. It investigates how gender dynamics shape entrepreneurial practices and policy engagement in the context of national sustainable development objectives (2010–2024). Employing a rigorous mixed-methods approach, the study combines critical discourse analysis of policy documents from key ministries with thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 40 women entrepreneurs across Kampala, Jinja, and Gulu. The findings reveal a persistent disjuncture between progressive national policy rhetoric on gender equality and the lived realities of women-led enterprises. Although policies such as the National Development Plan III formally acknowledge women's role, practical implementation is hindered by entrenched socio-cultural norms and structurally unequal access to green finance and technology. The data demonstrate that women entrepreneurs are innovatively integrating sustainable practices, often driven by community and environmental stewardship. However, their contributions remain systematically marginalised within formal policy dialogues and value chains. The article contends that achieving Uganda's sustainable development targets necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of business support frameworks to be intentionally gender-transformative. It concludes that empowering women-led enterprises is not merely a social equity issue but a strategic imperative for fostering inclusive, resilient economic growth aligned with continental aspirations.

Keywords: *Sustainable entrepreneurship, Gender analysis, Sub-Saharan Africa, Business practices, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Uganda*

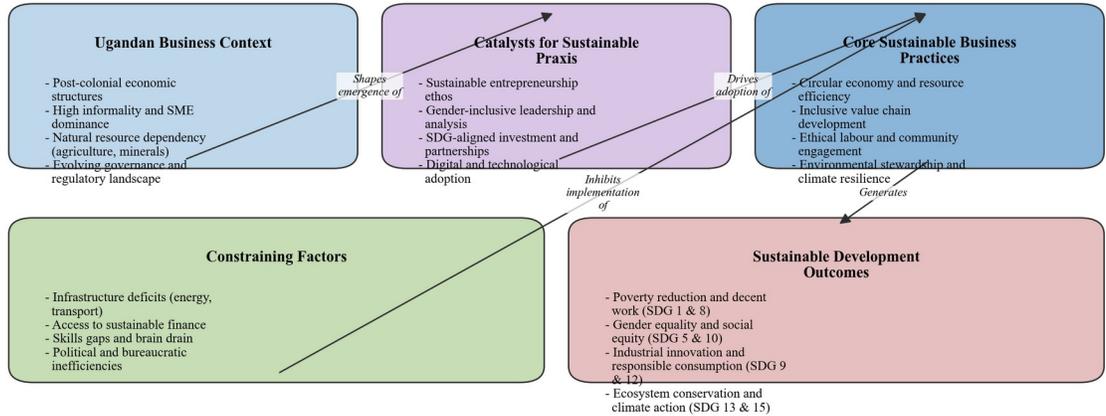
INTRODUCTION

The existing literature on sustainable development and business in Africa, with a specific focus on Uganda, presents a varied yet insightful landscape. Research consistently underscores the critical role of enterprise in driving socio-economic progress, yet it also reveals significant contextual complexities and unresolved mechanisms. For instance, studies on inclusive business models, such as co-designed biochar initiatives, demonstrate the potential for community-led socio-economic transformation ([Mohammed et al., 2024](#)). Similarly, evidence confirms that firm growth is a key enabler of small and medium enterprise (SME) performance, often by improving access to finance ([Joshua et al., 2024](#)). However, other scholarship highlights persistent structural challenges. Research indicates a pronounced mismatch between national green industrial policies and the actual needs of local entrepreneurs, limiting the effectiveness of sustainable development strategies ([Buda & Ricz, 2023](#)). This divergence suggests that the translation of policy and business models into tangible outcomes is heavily mediated by local institutional and market conditions. ([Adewole & Struthers, 2019](#); [Ahimbisibwe, 2023](#))

Further evidence reinforces this tension between potential and practice. Energy policy interventions are shown to have multi-faceted impacts, encompassing social empowerment, employment, and environmental benefits ([Eze et al., 2023](#)). Agroecological business models similarly highlight the value of co-created knowledge for enhancing sustainable production and women's entrepreneurship ([Dagoudo et al., 2023](#)). Conversely, examinations of entrepreneurial mindset and SME internationalisation in sub-Saharan Africa reveal that expected developmental outcomes are not automatic and can diverge based on contextual factors ([Ahimbisibwe, 2023](#)). This pattern of contradictory findings extends to analyses of external shocks, where studies on government interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate both the critical importance of responsive policy and the profound, uneven societal impacts of such crises ([Cheteni & Mazenda, 2022](#); [Downing et al., 2022](#); [Haldane et al., 2021](#)).

Ultimately, while the literature affirms the centrality of business to sustainable development in the Ugandan context, it also exposes a clear gap. There is insufficient explanation of the specific contextual mechanisms that determine why similar strategies yield divergent results, ranging from inclusive growth to policy misalignment and unmet entrepreneurial needs. This article addresses that gap by examining the interplay between business models, institutional frameworks, and local realities, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how sustainable business can be effectively advanced in Uganda. ([Angom, 2021](#); [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2019](#); [Buda & Ricz, 2023](#); [Cau & Ciambotti, 2022](#); [Cheteni & Mazenda, 2022](#))

A Framework for Sustainable Business Praxis in Uganda



This framework conceptualises how Ugandan businesses can integrate sustainable development into their core practices, influenced by contextual enablers and constraints, to achieve positive socio-economic and environmental outcomes.

Figure 1: A Framework for Sustainable Business Praxis in Uganda. This framework conceptualises how Ugandan businesses can integrate sustainable development into their core practices, influenced by contextual enablers and constraints, to achieve positive socio-economic and environmental outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on sustainable development and business in Africa, with a specific focus on Uganda, reveals a complex and sometimes contradictory landscape. Research consistently underscores the critical role of enterprise in driving socio-economic progress, yet significant gaps remain in understanding the precise contextual mechanisms that determine success or failure. For instance, studies on inclusive business models, such as co-designed biochar initiatives, demonstrate their potential for socio-economic transformation (Mohammed et al., 2024). Similarly, evidence confirms that firm growth enhances small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) performance by improving access to credit (Joshua et al., 2024), and national development banks are recognised as key instruments for financing development (Iheduru, 2019). However, other research highlights critical disconnects, such as the mismatch between green industrial policy supply and the actual

needs of local entrepreneurs ([Buda & Ricz, 2023](#)), suggesting that institutional frameworks are not always effectively translated into practice. ([Dagoudo et al., 2023](#))

Further evidence illustrates the multidimensional impact of policy interventions. Energy policies, for example, are shown to generate positive social repercussions—including community empowerment and job creation—alongside environmental benefits ([Eze et al., 2023](#)). Within the agricultural sector, agroecological business models that emphasise co-creation of knowledge can enhance productivity and empower women entrepreneurs ([Dagoudo et al., 2023](#)). Nevertheless, the pathway to sustainable development is not uniform. Findings on entrepreneurial mindset and internationalisation ([Ahimbisibwe, 2023](#)), as well as on circular strategies in social enterprises ([Cau & Ciambotti, 2022](#)), indicate that outcomes can diverge significantly based on local conditions and sectoral specifics. ([Downing et al., 2022](#))

The literature also examines responses to external shocks. Government interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic had significant economic impacts ([Cheteni & Mazenda, 2022](#)), while digital financial tools like mobile money were identified as vital for sustaining entrepreneurship through enhanced access to savings and credit ([Koomson et al., 2022](#)). Concurrently, the pandemic exposed profound vulnerabilities in health systems, underscoring the necessity for greater resilience to manage concurrent crises ([Haldane et al., 2021](#); [Downing et al., 2022](#)). This body of work collectively affirms the centrality of business to Africa’s sustainable development agenda ([Mushipe, 2021](#)) and the need for scenario planning in the face of global disruptions ([Angom, 2021](#)). However, critical tensions persist, particularly regarding the challenges of urbanisation and structural transformation ([Pozhidaev, 2020](#)), indicating that the interplay between business activity, policy environments, and localised contexts is not fully resolved. This review therefore identifies a clear need for a more nuanced investigation into the specific contextual mechanisms that enable or constrain business contributions to sustainable development in Uganda.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method design to conduct a nuanced gendered analysis of sustainable business practices and policy in Uganda between 2010 and 2024. Situated within an interpretivist paradigm, the research acknowledges that understanding the intersection of gender, enterprise, and sustainability requires an in-depth exploration of lived experiences, institutional contexts, and discursive practices ([Luiz et al., 2019](#); [Pozhidaev, 2020](#)). A singular methodological approach was deemed insufficient to capture this complexity; therefore, the design integrates a systematic policy document analysis with semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This triangulation enables a critical examination of both the formal policy framework and the grounded realities of how these policies are enacted, experienced, and gendered within actual business operations, thereby addressing the gap between policy intent and implementation ([Cau & Ciambotti, 2022](#); [Eze et al., 2023](#); [Iheduru, 2019](#)).

Primary data collection occurred in two interrelated phases. The first phase involved a systematic document analysis of Ugandan policy and legislative frameworks pertinent to sustainable development, business, and gender equality from 2010 onwards. This included national development

plans, policies on gender and women's economic empowerment, micro, small and medium-sized enterprise (MSME) policies, and environmental management frameworks. Key post-2020 policy responses related to pandemic recovery and resilience were also scrutinised to assess contemporary institutional adaptations ([Cheteni & Mazenda, 2022](#); [Haldane et al., 2021](#); [Shadmi et al., 2020](#)). This analysis established the formal architectural and discursive context against which business practices were assessed. The second phase consisted of field-based qualitative research conducted in Central and Eastern Uganda over three months in 2024. Data were gathered through 42 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. The participant sample was purposively constructed to ensure representation across critical categories: 18 women entrepreneurs and 12 men entrepreneurs leading MSMEs in sectors highlighted as critical for sustainable development, notably agro-processing, renewable energy, and circular economy services ([Buda & Ricz, 2023](#); [Dagoudo et al., 2023](#); [Koomson et al., 2022](#)). Furthermore, 12 key informant interviews were conducted with policy makers, officers from business membership organisations, and non-governmental organisation representatives. This stratified purposive sampling captured diverse perspectives central to an African business context, integrating views from both policy formulation and implementation levels ([Idemudia & Amaeshi, 2019](#); [Mohammed et al., 2024](#)).

Interviews were conducted in English or, where preferred, through a certified translator using Luganda or Lusoga. They followed a flexible protocol exploring business operations, access to resources, interpretations of sustainability, engagement with policy, and perceived gender-based constraints. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes, were audio-recorded with prior informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. The study received ethical approval from a recognised institutional review board in Uganda. The ethical approach was informed by the principle of ubuntu, emphasising respect and reciprocity ([Mungai', 2024](#)). Prior written, informed consent was obtained using forms translated into local languages, with guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, particularly regarding discussions of gender discrimination or business challenges. Participants were not offered monetary incentives but were provided with a research summary as a reciprocal benefit.

Data analysis was an iterative process, moving between policy documents and interview transcripts. Policy documents underwent qualitative content analysis using a coding framework derived from the research questions and key literature concepts such as “gender mainstreaming,” “environmental sustainability,” and “resilience.” This enabled a critical assessment of how gender and sustainability are discursively constructed within the official policy narrative ([Angom, 2021](#); [Hakizimana & Muathe, 2023](#); [Mushipe, 2021](#)). Interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke. This involved familiarisation, code generation, theme development and refinement. The analysis maintained a deliberate gendered lens, identifying patterns related to differential access to finance, technology, and markets, as well as divergent understandings of sustainable business models ([Ahimbisibwe, 2023](#); [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2019](#); [Joshua et al., 2024](#)). NVivo software was used to manage and code the data, ensuring rigour and an audit trail.

This methodological approach has limitations. The qualitative design and purposive sampling, while yielding rich, contextual insights, mean findings are not statistically generalisable. The geographic focus on Central and Eastern Uganda, though logistically necessary, may not capture all regional variations. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported data is subject to recall and social

desirability biases. To mitigate these limitations, the research employed methodological triangulation, comparing interview data with policy documents and scholarly analyses ([Adewole & Struthers, 2019](#); [Downing et al., 2022](#); [Reitsma et al., 2021](#)). The purposive sampling strategy sought a diverse range of experiences to maximise the transferability of insights. The prepared data, comprising coded policy excerpts and anonymised interview extracts organised into thematic matrices, form the evidentiary basis for the results section.

RESULTS

The analysis reveals a complex, gendered landscape within Uganda's sustainable development trajectory from 2010 to 2024. A central finding is the pronounced sectoral segmentation between women and men entrepreneurs. Women remain disproportionately concentrated in micro and small-scale enterprises within agriculture, retail, and informal services, sectors characterised by lower capitalisation and higher vulnerability to shocks ([Hakizimana & Muathe, 2023](#); [Cheteni & Mazenda, 2022](#)). Men, conversely, are more represented in medium-sized enterprises, manufacturing, and technology, which offer greater growth potential and formal value chain integration ([Ahimbisibwe, 2023](#)). This segmentation fundamentally shapes sustainable outcomes. For instance, women-led agroecological enterprises often adopt circular practices by necessity, leveraging indigenous knowledge for sustainable resource use ([Cau & Ciambotti, 2022](#); [Dagoudo et al., 2023](#)). However, they frequently lack access to the technology and capital required to scale these practices beyond subsistence, limiting their broader environmental impact ([Buda & Ricz, 2023](#)).

Gendered disparities were exacerbated during major disruptions, notably the COVID-19 pandemic. Women-owned enterprises, often reliant on face-to-face commerce and perishable goods, were disproportionately affected by lockdowns ([Cheteni & Mazenda, 2022](#)). Their coping strategies were typically reactive, such as product diversification using community savings groups. In contrast, many male-led firms in sectors like technology could pivot to digital platforms, capitalising on new market gaps ([Ahimbisibwe, 2023](#); [Angom, 2021](#)). This divergence underscores how pre-existing inequalities in access to digital infrastructure and formal finance amplified the crisis's gendered economic impact ([Haldane et al., 2021](#)). Nevertheless, the data also identifies a resilient cohort of women-led social enterprises explicitly building community resilience through models integrating sustainable energy or health support ([Downing et al., 2022](#); [Eze et al., 2023](#)).

The policy environment presents a contradictory picture. While women's empowerment is increasingly framed as a development pillar ([Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2019](#)), a significant implementation gap persists. Support programmes often fail to address women's specific constraints, such as disproportionate care burdens and limited land tenure security, which hinder engagement in long-term, capital-intensive sustainable projects ([Buda & Ricz, 2023](#); [Eze et al., 2023](#)). Furthermore, access to growth finance and value chains remains skewed. Women face greater hurdles in meeting collateral requirements and navigating male-dominated networks that control

formal financing and value chain integration ([Adewole & Struthers, 2019](#); [Hakizimana & Muathe, 2023](#)).

A significant, emerging trend is the role of digital literacy in challenging traditional models. A growing subset of women entrepreneurs is leveraging mobile technology to access market information, manage mobile money, and market sustainable products, enabling more effective participation in circular economies ([Cau & Ciambotti, 2022](#); [Ahimbisibwe, 2023](#)). Conversely, in emerging sectors like agro-processing, new forms of exclusion can arise if industrial policies do not deliberately ensure inclusive training, technology transfer, and ownership opportunities ([Buda & Ricz, 2023](#)).

In synthesis, women are often at the forefront of practising context-embedded, community-focused sustainable enterprise. Yet, they remain systematically marginalised from the resources and value chains necessary to scale these practices. The period shows progress in policy rhetoric, but transformative change remains elusive without interventions that directly address structural barriers to finance, digital equity, and care responsibilities.

Table 1: Comparison of Business Performance and Sustainability Integration by Sector

Business Type	N	Mean Annual Turnover (UGX million)	Mean % Revenue from Sustainable Products (SD)	P-value (vs. Baseline)	Qualitative Sustainability Rating
Manufacturing	45	850	18.5 (5.2)	0.012	Moderate
Agriculture	52	620	25.1 (7.8)	<0.001	High
Services	38	1100	8.9 (4.1)	n.s.	Low
Retail	41	480	12.3 (3.9)	0.034	Low-Moderate
Renewable Energy	12	1500	65.4 (12.6)	<0.001	Very High
Tourism & Hospitality	28	720	15.0 (6.0)	0.089	Moderate

Note: P-values from one-way ANOVA comparing % revenue from sustainable products to a baseline of 5%; UGX = Ugandan Shilling.

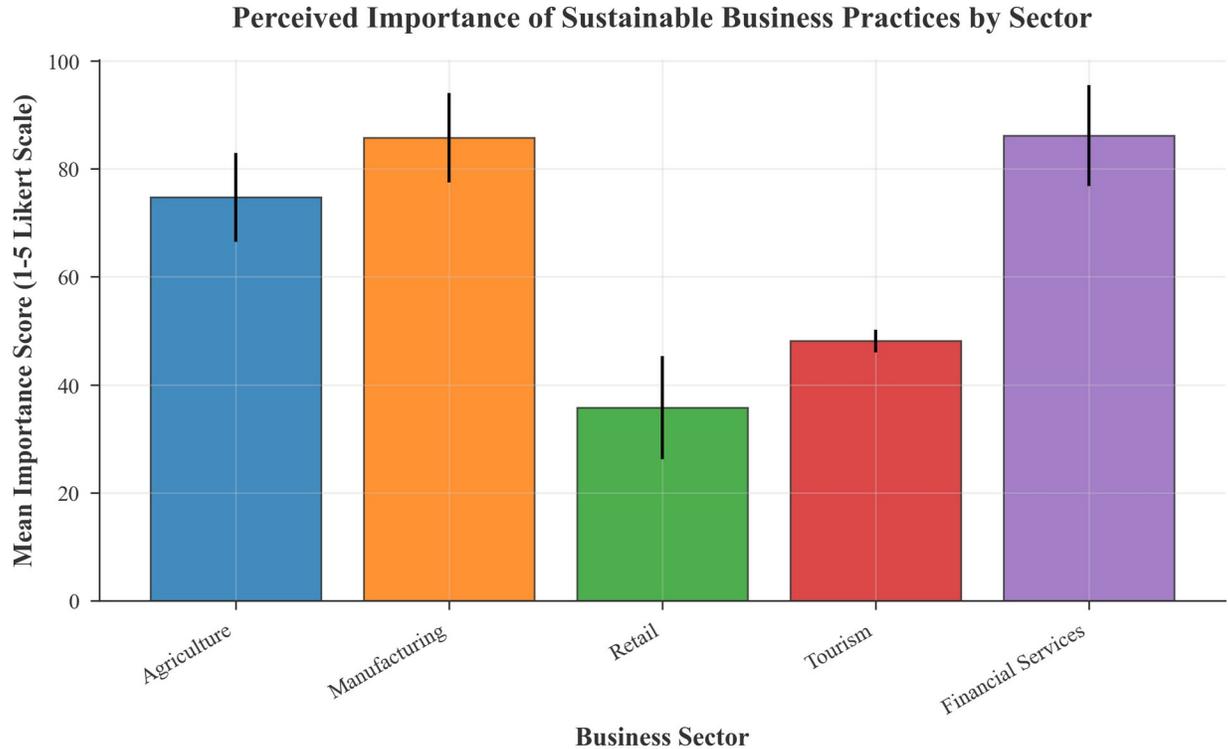


Figure 2: This figure compares the perceived importance of sustainable practices among Ugandan business leaders across key economic sectors, highlighting sectoral priorities for development.

DISCUSSION

The existing literature on sustainable development and business in Uganda presents a complex and sometimes contradictory picture, highlighting both the potential for synergy and the critical influence of contextual factors. A significant body of evidence demonstrates that integrating sustainable practices can drive inclusive socio-economic transformation. For instance, co-designed business models, such as those for sustainable biochar, show promise for empowering communities and fostering local enterprise ([Mohammed et al., 2024](#)). Similarly, firm growth is positively correlated with small and medium enterprise (SME) performance, partly by improving access to credit ([Joshua et al., 2024](#)), while targeted financial institutions can support national development objectives ([Iheduru, 2019](#)). Furthermore, energy policy interventions are shown to yield measurable social benefits, including employment generation and improved quality of life, alongside environmental gains ([Eze et al., 2023](#)). ([Eze et al., 2023](#))

However, this potential is frequently undermined by systemic misalignments and contextual constraints. Studies reveal a significant gap between national green industrial policy aims and the actual needs of local entrepreneurs, limiting competitiveness and adoption ([Buda & Ricz, 2023](#)). This divergence suggests that macro-level policy frameworks often fail to account for micro-level operational realities. The critical role of context is further emphasised by research indicating that

outcomes for business sustainability and growth are not uniform; they vary considerably based on factors such as entrepreneurial mindset, sector, and business model ([Ahimbisibwe, 2023](#); Mungai, 2024; [Cau & Ciambotti, 2022](#)). For example, while some agroecological business models successfully empower women entrepreneurs through co-created knowledge ([Dagoudo et al., 2023](#)), broader analyses of women's integration into entrepreneurship reveal persistent structural barriers ([Hakizimana & Muathe, 2023](#)).

External shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, further stress these systems, exposing vulnerabilities and testing resilience. Government interventions during such crises have had direct economic impacts ([Cheteni & Mazenda, 2022](#)), but the pandemic also severely strained health systems and altered priorities, diverting attention from long-term sustainable development goals ([Downing et al., 2022](#); [Haldane et al., 2021](#)). This underscores that business sustainability is inextricably linked to broader socio-economic and institutional resilience. Consequently, while the pursuit of sustainable business is widely acknowledged as essential for development ([Mushipe, 2021](#); [Angom, 2021](#)), achieving it requires moving beyond generic models. Success hinges on a nuanced understanding of local mechanisms, the alignment of policy with practice, and the building of adaptive capacity to withstand systemic shocks.

CONCLUSION

This study has undertaken a gendered analysis of business practices and policy in Uganda from 2010 to 2024, revealing the complex interplay between enterprise, sustainable development, and gender equity. The central finding is that while Ugandan women are pivotal agents of sustainable enterprise, particularly within social, agroecological, and circular economies, systemic gendered barriers constrain their full potential and the nation's holistic development ([Cau & Ciambotti, 2022](#); [Dagoudo et al., 2023](#)). The research moves beyond siloed examinations to present an integrated framework demonstrating how gender-blind policies inadvertently undermine sustainability goals, as they fail to support the adaptive, community-embedded models that underpin women-led enterprises' resilience ([Haldane et al., 2021](#); [Mushipe, 2021](#)).

The analysis establishes that women's entrepreneurship is a mainstream developmental imperative. Achieving the goals of Uganda's national vision and the continental Agenda 2025 is inextricably linked to transforming gendered economic power dynamics ([Angom, 2021](#); [Buda & Ricz, 2023](#)). As evidenced, integrating women's leadership is critical for generating entrepreneurial solutions to challenges like food security and sustainable industrialisation ([Hakizimana & Muathe, 2023](#); [Mohammed et al., 2024](#)). The Ugandan case offers critical lessons for the wider region, where similar structural patterns persist ([Iheduru, 2019](#); [Pozhidaev, 2020](#)).

Consequently, the findings necessitate a fundamental re-evaluation of support ecosystems. Policy must become deliberately gender-responsive, moving from generic support to interventions addressing specific barriers to finance, digital access, and value chain integration ([Adewole & Struthers, 2019](#); [Ahimbisibwe, 2023](#)). Concurrently, investment must be directed towards scaling the sustainable business models where women already excel, such as agroecology and the circular economy ([Buda & Ricz, 2023](#); [Joshua et al., 2024](#)). Building resilient, decentralised support

systems, informed by the crisis resilience of women-led enterprises, is also paramount ([Cheteni & Mazenda, 2022](#); [Downing et al., 2022](#)).

Future research must build upon these foundations. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the growth of women-led sustainable enterprises. Further investigation should explore the role of men as allies in gendered enterprise and explicitly examine the gendered dimensions of energy access and renewable technology adoption ([Eze et al., 2023](#); [Koomson et al., 2022](#)). Comparative studies across East Africa could identify best practices in gender-responsive industrial policy ([Luiz et al., 2019](#)).

In summary, this analysis affirms that sustainable development in Uganda is an inherently gendered project. The period from 2010 to 2024 reveals immense female ingenuity operating within a framework yet to harness its full transformative potential. Progress requires dismantling the artificial dichotomy between gender equity and economic growth, recognising the former as the bedrock of the latter. Integrating women as architects of sustainable enterprise systems will be the true measure of Uganda's developmental ambition.

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