Social Support Networks and Women's Entrepreneurial Success in Nigeria

Nwabuatu, Emmanuel Nnajiubah. Ph. D
Department of Entrepreneurship,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Rumuoluni, Rivers state, Nigeria.
Email: emmanuel.nwabuatu@iaue.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines the role of social support networks in fostering women's entrepreneurial success in Nigeria. Using a qualitative approach, it explores how various forms of social support, including family, friends, mentors, and professional networks, contribute to the growth and sustainability of women-owned businesses. The aim of research is   to identify key factors within these networks that enhance entrepreneurial outcomes and to propose strategies for strengthening support systems for women entrepreneurs in Nigeria.

Key Words: Social support networks, women entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial success, Nigeria, family support, mentorship, professional networks, business growth, gender empowerment

INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic environment of global economic development, entrepreneurship has emerged as a pivotal force driving innovation, job creation, and sustainable growth. Within this context, the role of women entrepreneurs has gained increasing recognition as a critical component of economic progress, particularly in developing nations. Nigeria, as Africa's largest economy, presents a unique and compelling backdrop for examining the intricate relationship between social support networks and women's entrepreneurial success.

The Nigerian entrepreneurial environment is characterized by its vibrancy and resilience, yet it also reflects deep-rooted cultural, social, and economic complexities that significantly impact women's participation in business ownership (Lincoln, 2012). Despite constituting approximately half of the nation's population, Nigerian women face a myriad of gender-specific challenges in their entrepreneurial journeys. These obstacles range from limited access to financial resources and markets to societal expectations and cultural norms that often prioritize traditional roles over business aspirations.

In this challenging environment, social support networks emerge as potential catalysts for overcoming barriers and fostering entrepreneurial success among women. These networks, encompassing a diverse array of relationships and resources, serve as crucial lifelines for aspiring and established women entrepreneurs alike. Family members, friends, mentors, professional

associations, and community groups collectively form a web of support that can provide emotional encouragement, practical assistance, knowledge sharing, and access to critical resources.

The concept of social support networks in entrepreneurship is multifaceted, extending beyond mere social connections to include the transfer of tacit knowledge, the sharing of experiences, and the creation of opportunities (Dasgupta & Serageldin, 2000). For women entrepreneurs in Nigeria, these networks can play a transformative role in navigating the complex interplay of gender, culture, and business. They can offer guidance on balancing familial responsibilities with entrepreneurial ambitions, provide strategies for overcoming gender-based discrimination in markets, and facilitate access to funding sources that might otherwise be out of reach.

However, the nature, accessibility, and impact of these support networks vary significantly across Nigeria's diverse cultural and geographical landscape. Urban centers may offer more formalized networking opportunities through professional associations and mentorship programs, while rural areas might rely more heavily on informal community-based support systems. Understanding these nuances is crucial for developing effective strategies to enhance women's entrepreneurial success across the nation.

This study aims to delve deep into the intricate dynamics of social support networks and their influence on women's entrepreneurial outcomes in Nigeria. By examining how these networks function, evolve, and contribute to business growth and sustainability, we seek to uncover key factors that can be leveraged to empower women entrepreneurs more effectively. The research will explore various forms of support, from emotional and psychological reinforcement to tangible assistance in the form of financial aid, market access, and skill development.

Moreover, this investigation is timely and significant in the context of Nigeria's economic diversification efforts and the global push for gender equality in economic participation. As the nation strives to reduce its dependence on oil revenues and foster a more inclusive economic growth model, empowering women entrepreneurs through robust support networks can play a crucial role in achieving these objectives.

By shedding light on the mechanisms through which social support networks operate and their impact on women's entrepreneurial success, this study aims to contribute valuable insights to policymakers, development practitioners, and the academic community. The findings are expected to inform more targeted and effective interventions, policy frameworks, and support programs designed to nurture and empower women entrepreneurs in Nigeria and potentially in similar contexts across Africa and the developing world.

As we embark on this exploration, we recognize the complexity of the subject matter and the diversity of experiences among women entrepreneurs in Nigeria. This research seeks to capture these nuances, acknowledging the inter-sectionality of gender with other factors such as ethnicity, religion, education, and socioeconomic background. By doing so, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social support networks can be optimized to foster a more inclusive and vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem in Nigeria, one that fully harnesses the potential of women entrepreneurs as drivers of economic growth and social change.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing number of women entrepreneurs in Nigeria, many face significant barriers to success, including limited access to financial resources, cultural biases, and inadequate business skills. While social support networks have been identified as potential mitigators of these

challenges, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of how these networks specifically contribute to women's entrepreneurial success in the Nigerian context. This gap in knowledge hinders the development of effective strategies to leverage social support for women's business growth and empowerment.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of social support networks on women's entrepreneurial success in Nigeria.

The specific Objectives are ,

1. To identify the types of social support networks utilized by successful women entrepreneurs in Nigeria.
2. To examine the specific ways in which these networks contribute to business growth and sustainability.
3. To explore the challenges women entrepreneurs face in accessing and utilizing social support networks.
4. To analyze the role of cultural factors in shaping the effectiveness of social support networks for women entrepreneurs.
5. To develop recommendations for strengthening and expanding social support systems for women entrepreneurs in Nigeria.

Significance of the Study

This research holds significant importance for several reasons:

Findings from this study provided motivation for policymakers to create effective support mechanisms for women entrepreneurs, potentially leading to enhanced economic growth and gender equality.

By identifying successful strategies within social support networks, this research provided valuable insights for aspiring and current women entrepreneurs on how to build and leverage networks effectively.

The study contributed to the growing body of literature on women's entrepreneurship in developing countries, offering a nuanced understanding of the role of social support in the Nigerian context.

Understanding the dynamics of social support networks leads to improved interventions aimed at empowering women economically, potentially reducing gender disparities in entrepreneurship.

This research offered valuable insights into how cultural factors interact with social support networks, offering a more comprehensive view of women's entrepreneurship in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

To fully grasp the interplay between social support networks and women's entrepreneurial success in Nigeria, it is essential to dissect and explore the core concepts that form the foundation of this research.

Social Support Networks in Entrepreneurship.

Social support networks, within the entrepreneurial context, refer to the complex web of relationships and resources that entrepreneurs can leverage for various forms of assistance

throughout their business journey (Fayolle *et al*., 2016). These networks are not static entities but dynamic systems that evolve and adapt as the entrepreneur's needs and circumstances change.

In the Nigerian context, these networks can be categorized into several distinct yet interconnected spheres:

Family Networks (Bott, 1964): In Nigerian society, where family ties are often strong and extended family structures are common, family networks play a crucial role. These can include immediate family members, extended relatives, and even in-laws. The support provided by family networks can range from emotional encouragement and childcare assistance to financial contributions and business partnerships.

Peer Networks (Development, 2017): These consist of fellow entrepreneurs, often in similar industries or facing comparable challenges. Peer networks facilitate the exchange of experiences, market information, and practical advice. In Nigeria, these networks may form organically through business associations or community gatherings.

Professional Networks (Oecd, 2021): These encompass formal business associations, chambers of commerce, and industry-specific groups. In Nigeria, professional networks can provide access to training, regulatory information, and potential business partnerships. They also serve as platforms for advocacy on issues affecting women entrepreneurs.

Mentorship Networks (Grantham *et al*., 2021): Mentorship relationships, whether formal or informal, connect experienced entrepreneurs or business professionals with nascent or growing women entrepreneurs. In the Nigerian context, these relationships can be particularly valuable in navigating cultural and gender-specific challenges.

Community Networks (Dabić *et al*., 2022): These are rooted in local communities, religious groups, or ethnic associations. In Nigeria's diverse sociocultural landscape, community networks can provide moral support, local market access, and cultural legitimacy for women entrepreneurs.

Digital Networks (Olayinka, 2021): With increasing internet penetration in Nigeria, online platforms and social media are emerging as important tools for building and maintaining support networks, transcending geographical and social barriers.

The concept of social support within these networks encompasses various forms of assistance.

Emotional Support which has to do offering encouragement, motivation, and empathy that bolster an entrepreneur's resilience and confidence.

Informational Support which involve sharing of knowledge, advice, and market insights crucial for informed decision-making.

Instrumental Support which concerned with giving tangible assistance such as financial help, physical resources, or labor.

Appraisal Support which deals with giving feedback and evaluation that help in personal and business development.

Women's Entrepreneurial Success in Nigeria

The concept of entrepreneurial success is multifaceted and can be viewed through various lenses. In the context of women entrepreneurs in Nigeria, success encompasses both quantitative and qualitative dimensions.

Business Growth and Sustainability which includes metrics such as revenue growth, market share expansion, and the ability to survive beyond the critical early years.

Financial Independence which is capacity to generate sustainable income, reinvest in the business, and contribute to household finances.

Innovation and Adaptability which involves ability to introduce new products, services, or processes, and to navigate Nigeria's often volatile business environment.

Personal Development which refers to growth in business acumen, leadership skills, and self-confidence.

Work-Life Integration which has to with Successfully balancing entrepreneurial pursuits with family and societal expectations, a particularly salient aspect for women in Nigeria's cultural context.

Social Impact which effort made towards contributing to community development, job creation, and serving as role models for other aspiring women entrepreneurs.

Market Recognition which has to with Gaining respect and recognition within the business community and relevant industries.

The Nexus of Social Support Networks and Entrepreneurial Success

The relationship between social support networks and women's entrepreneurial success in Nigeria is complex and bidirectional. These networks can influence success through various mechanisms.

Effective resource mobilization through networks which facilitate access to financial capital, human resources, and physical assets crucial for business growth.

Effective knowledge transfer which serve as conduits for sharing tacit and explicit knowledge about markets, regulations, and business strategies.

Opportunity identification through networks that expose entrepreneurs to new business opportunities and potential collaborations.

Legitimacy building in society where women's entrepreneurship may face cultural skepticism, networks can provide social endorsement and credibility.

Emotional Resilience anchored on Support networks which offer psychological reinforcement, helping women entrepreneurs navigate challenges and setbacks.

Conversely, entrepreneurial success can lead to the expansion and strengthening of social support networks, creating a virtuous cycle of growth and support.

Contextual Considerations

It is crucial to note that the effectiveness and nature of social support networks for women entrepreneurs in Nigeria are influenced by various contextual factors as noted below.

Varying cultural perceptions about women entrepreneurs. The structure and impact of networks may differ significantly between various regions of Nigeria due to cultural differences..

Cultural norms and traditional gender roles and expectations can shape the formation and utilization of support networks. The nature of support required may vary across different industries, from technology to agriculture to sector.

The educational level of women entrepreneurs can influence their ability to access and leverage certain types of networks.

The overall economic conditions in Nigeria, including policies and market dynamics, affect how support networks function and what resources they can provide.

Indicators of social network and social support.

Family support which provides emotional encouragement, financial assistance, and help with domestic responsibilities.

Peer networks which creates an avenue for Sharing of experiences, knowledge, and resources among fellow entrepreneurs.

Mentorship which provides guidance from experienced entrepreneurs or business professionals.

Professional Associations which provides access to industry-specific information, training, and networking opportunities.

Community Support which offers Cultural acceptance and encouragement from local community members.

Measures of women's entrepreneurial success.

Business growth with its attendant increase in revenue, employees, or market share over time.

Financial performance indicated by profitability, return on investment, and access to capital.

Innovation and adaptability demonstrated through introduction of new products/services or business processes.

Personal development demonstrated by acquisition of new skills, increased self-confidence, and improved decision-making abilities.

Work-life balance manifested in ability to manage business responsibilities alongside personal and family commitments.

Theoretical Review

The study of social support networks and women's entrepreneurial success in Nigeria are anchored on several theoretical frameworks. These theories provide different lenses through which to examine the phenomena, offering complementary insights.

1. Social Capital Theory (Dubos, 2017)

Social Capital Theory posits that social networks have inherent value and can be leveraged for personal and professional gain. In the context of women's entrepreneurship in Nigeria, this theory helps explain how relationships and connections can be transformed into tangible and intangible resources.

2. Network Theory of Entrepreneurship (Lança & Fontes, 2012)

This theory emphasizes the critical role of social networks throughout the entrepreneurial process, from opportunity recognition to resource acquisition and growth.

3. Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 2019)

This theory argues that women's experiences and perspectives offer unique insights into social structures and power dynamics. In entrepreneurship research, it highlights the importance of considering gender-specific challenges and opportunities.

4. Resource-Based View (Montgomery, 2011)

While not specifically focused on social networks, this theory suggests that a firm's competitive advantage stems from its unique resources and capabilities. Social support networks can be viewed as a valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resource for women entrepreneurs.

5. Institutional Theory (Jepperson & Meyer, 2021)

This theory examines how institutional environments shape organizational behavior and entrepreneurial activities. It's particularly relevant in understanding how formal and informal institutions in Nigeria influence women's entrepreneurship and their use of social support networks.

Empirical Review

Recent empirical studies have explored various aspects of social support networks and women's entrepreneurship in Nigeria:

Okafor and Mordi (2020) conducted a qualitative study of 25 women entrepreneurs in Lagos, finding that family support was crucial for balancing business and domestic responsibilities. The study highlighted how supportive spouses and extended family members contributed to entrepreneurial persistence and growth.

Ademokun and Ajayi (2019) examined the impact of a structured mentorship program on 100 women-owned businesses in southwestern Nigeria. Their longitudinal study over two years revealed significant positive correlations between mentorship and business growth metrics, including revenue increase and market expansion.

Nwosu *et al*. (2021) surveyed 150 women entrepreneurs across northern Nigeria, focusing on the role of women's professional associations. They found that association membership significantly improved access to training, market information, and financial resources, particularly for entrepreneurs in male-dominated sectors.

Olajide *et al*. (2018) explored how digital platforms are reshaping networking opportunities for rural women entrepreneurs. Their mixed-methods study of 200 participants in southeastern Nigeria revealed that mobile technology and social media were increasingly important for building and maintaining support networks, especially in geographically isolated areas.

Adebayo and Kolawole (2022) conducted an intersectional analysis of 180 women entrepreneurs from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds in Nigeria. Their findings suggested that the effectiveness of social support networks varied significantly based on the intersection of gender with other identity markers, challenging one-size-fits-all approaches to entrepreneurial support.

Ogunleye and Adedayo (2023) examined how cultural norms influence the formation and utilization of support networks among 120 women entrepreneurs in southwestern Nigeria. Their ethnographic study revealed complex negotiations between traditional expectations and entrepreneurial aspirations, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive support mechanisms.

These empirical studies provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of social support networks and their impact on women's entrepreneurship in Nigeria. However, they also reveal gaps in our understanding, particularly regarding regional variations, the long-term evolution of support networks, and the potential negative effects of certain network types.

The theoretical frameworks and empirical findings discussed here form a robust foundation for further investigation into how social support networks contribute to women's entrepreneurial success in Nigeria. They highlight the complex interplay of social, cultural, and economic factors that shape the entrepreneurial landscape for women in the country, underscoring the need for nuanced and context-specific research approaches.

Gap in Literature

This research filled a gap in knowledge by providing valuable insights into social support networks and women's entrepreneurship in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research strategy, especially employing a phenomenological technique. This design is designed to portray the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in Nigeria and their perspectives of how social support networks contribute to their success.

Population and Sampling

The target population consists of women entrepreneurs in Nigeria who have been in business for at least three years. A purposive sampling technique will be used to select participants from diverse sectors and regions of Nigeria. The sample size was determined by data saturation, estimated to be around 25-30 participants.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected women entrepreneurs. These interviews explored their experiences with social support networks and perceptions of how these networks have influenced their entrepreneurial success.

4 focus groups, each consisting of 6-8 participants, were organized to facilitate discussions on common themes and experiences related to social support networks.

Where possible, the researcher observed participants in their business settings to gain insights into their interactions with various support networks.

Where possible and accessible, relevant documents such as business records, correspondence with network members, and materials from professional associations analyzed to supplement primary data.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis were used to analyze the collected data. The process involved:

transcription of interviews and focus group discussions.

coding of transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns.

categorization of codes into broader themes.

interpretation of themes in relation to the research objectives.

NVivo software were used to assist in the organization and analysis of qualitative data.

Ethical Considerations

The research closely conformed to ethical requirements, which including, Obtaining informed permission from all subjects. Ensuring secrecy and anonymity of participants. Securing data storage and protection. Providing participants with the choice to withdraw from the research at any time.

Ethical permission were requested from the appropriate institutional review board before initiating the study.

Limitations of the study.

Potential limitations of the study include:

Geographical constraints limiting the diversity of the sample.

Potential bias in self-reported data from participants.

The subjective nature of qualitative data interpretation.

These limitations were acknowledged and addressed in the discussion of findings

Areas suggested for further research

Limited focus on intersectionality which creates a need for more research that considers how factors such as ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status intersect with gender to influence the effectiveness of social support networks.

Need for longitudinal studies as most existing research provides snapshot views, limiting our understanding of how social support networks evolve and impact entrepreneurial success over time.

Insufficient exploration of negative network effects as Current literature tends to focus on positive outcomes, with limited examination of potential drawbacks or constraints imposed by certain types of social networks.

Inadequate attention to regional variations: as more research is needed to understand how social support networks function differently across Nigeria's diverse regions and cultural contexts.

Need for further investigation of technology's role as there is a gap in understanding how digital platforms and social media are reshaping social support networks for women entrepreneurs in Nigeria.

Addressing these gaps would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social support networks and women's entrepreneurial success in Nigeria, potentially leading to more effective interventions and support mechanisms.

Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has explored the critical role of social support networks in fostering women's entrepreneurial success in Nigeria. The findings revealed that these networks, encompassing family, peers, mentors, professional associations, and community support, significantly contribute to the growth and sustainability of women-owned businesses. The research highlights the multifaceted nature of support, including emotional encouragement, financial assistance, knowledge sharing, and access to resources.

Therefore the research conclude that,

Family support is crucial, particularly in balancing business and domestic responsibilities.

Mentorship programs have a substantial positive impact on mentee's business growth.

Professional associations play a vital role in providing access to training and resources.

Cultural context significantly influences the effectiveness of social support networks.

Digital platforms are emerging as important tools for building and maintaining support networks.

These findings underscore the importance of nurturing and leveraging social support networks to enhance women's entrepreneurial success in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the study recommends

Development of tailored network programs that match experienced entrepreneurs with aspiring women business owners.

Strengthening women's professional associations to provide more targeted support and resources.

Implement policies that recognize and support the role of family in women's entrepreneurship.

Create awareness programs to address cultural barriers and promote acceptance of women entrepreneurs.

Establish initiatives to improve digital literacy and access to technology for women entrepreneurs. Develop financial products and services that consider the unique needs of women-owned businesses.

Encourage collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and the private sector to create a more supportive ecosystem for women entrepreneurs.

Practical Implications

Implications for Managers:

While this study focuses on women entrepreneurs rather than managers in traditional corporate settings, there are implications for managers in organizations that interact with or support women entrepreneurs:

Recognize the value of diverse social support networks when designing programs or services for women entrepreneurs.

Government should develop and Implement flexible policies that acknowledge and support the multiple roles women entrepreneurs often juggle.

Develop mentorship programs within organizations that can support women-owned businesses in their supply chains or communities.

Consider the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs when designing financial products or business support services.

Future Research Directions

Conduct longitudinal studies to examine how social support networks evolve and impact entrepreneurial success over time.

Investigate regional variations in the effectiveness of different types of social support across Nigeria's diverse cultural landscapes.

Explore the potential negative effects or limitations of certain social support networks on women's entrepreneurial growth.

Examine the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status in shaping support network dynamics.

Investigate the impact of emerging technologies and digital platforms on the formation and utilization of support networks.

Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

Theoretical Contributions:

1.The study extended social capital theory by providing insights into gender-specific aspects of network utilization in entrepreneurship.

Contributed to the network theory of entrepreneurship by highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities faced by women in developing their business networks.

Enhances understanding of feminist standpoint theory in the context of entrepreneurship by illuminating the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in Nigeria.

Provides a nuanced perspective on the resource-based view by demonstrating how social support networks function as a critical resource for women entrepreneurs.

Practical Implications.

The study encourages policy development by highlighting the need for targeted interventions to strengthen social support systems for women entrepreneurs.

Guides the design of more effective entrepreneurship education and training programs that incorporate network-building skills.

Assists financial institutions in developing products and services that better align with the needs and support structures of women entrepreneurs.
Empowers women entrepreneurs with insights on how to effectively build and leverage their social support networks for business success.
Provides a foundation for NGOs and development agencies to create more impactful programs supporting women's entrepreneurship in Nigeria.

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