

# Challenges and opportunities for informal female entrepreneurs in Nigeria using the 5M framework.

JAMES, I. and ONOSHAKPOR, C.

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# **Challenges and Opportunities for Informal Female Entrepreneurs in Nigeria using the 5M Framework.**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper examines how informal female entrepreneurs (IFEs) navigate the intersecting challenges of informality, gender, and patriarchy and how they develop coping strategies to remain in business. We draw on the existing “5M” framework to highlight how the embeddedness of money, motherhood, management, market, and the macro/meso environment dimensions influence female entrepreneur’s experiences in Nigeria.

**Design/methodology/approach** - The interpretivist phenomenological approach is adopted to understand the challenges and opportunities available to IFEs in Nigeria. Preliminary data were collected using an online questionnaire, and 20 semi-structured interviews.

**Findings** - The result uncovers several challenges, including institutional voids, high inflation rates, work-life balance and limited business opportunities. The findings demonstrate how IFEs streamline products and service offerings to suit perceived structural inequalities while developing coping strategies to remain in business. However, growth opportunities are evidenced through innovativeness and resource pooling within informal communities.

**Originality/Value** – We advance research on the contextual embeddedness of informal female entrepreneurship in a unique context where patriarchal structures remain strong. Empirically, it contributes to the literature by examining the intersection of informality, gender and patriarchy to understand the complex nature of informal female entrepreneurship in Nigeria. It further provides insights into the challenges that lead to continuous informality using a gendered lens- 5M framework.

**Implications** - This research recommends the opportunities available to IFEs, which could provide a better business environment if harnessed. In addition, we highlight the need for further research on female entrepreneurship in the context of developing economies.

**Keywords:** Informal Female entrepreneurship, Institutions, Entrepreneurship, Nigeria, 5M Framework

## **Introduction**

Informal Female entrepreneurs (IFEs) refer to females who operate businesses informally without any national, regional or local government registration (Thapa Karti et al., 2021), either out of choice or a pathway to formalisation (Williams and Martinez-Perez, 2014). Social

institutions and cultural norms shape the entrepreneurial decisions of these women. The informal economy contributes significantly (40-60%) to the national GDPs of developing countries (Vanek et al., 2014). These sets of entrepreneurs have been neglected, and their choices have been downplayed (Sutter et al., 2019). In Nigeria, although IFEs comprise a large and diverse group of entrepreneurs accounting for 65% of the economy and 90% share of employment, there remains a perceived neglect (Atarah et al., 2021).

Looking at female entrepreneurship from Nigeria's developing economy context offers insights, as this geographical area is largely overlooked. A few studies have investigated institutional barriers (Ademiluyi, 2019), social capital and business performance (Olamide and Ogbechie, 2021), entrepreneurial challenges and gender issues (Igwe et al., 2018) as they relate to IFEs. Previous studies also argue that despite the country under investigation recording significant growth of female entrepreneurs, they still experience restrictions that come from obnoxious traditions and customs stemming from biased socio-cultural, institutional, and regulatory environments that create unequal opportunities (Ajayi and Olotuah, 2005; Igwe et al., 2018; Ng et al., 2022; Onoshakpor et al., 2023a). However, the lack of research highlights the opportunities that could emanate from 'informality'. To explore these social and cultural constructs that challenge and highlight potential opportunities for women entrepreneurs operating in the informal economy in Nigeria, we adopt Brush et al.'s (2009) "5M" gender framework, which comprises the following five factors: money, management, market, motherhood and the macro/meso environment. This framework enables us to present a critical evidence-based discourse on IFEs in Nigeria and ultimately proffer opportunities for the overlooked group through recommendations.

Limited research has adopted the 5M framework to understand the factors intersecting to influence female-owned businesses in the informal sector. Similarly, a few studies have used this framework in Nigeria to study formal women-owned businesses. However, this well-accepted framework has not been adopted to investigate informal women-owned businesses. These groups (IFEs) continue to be neglected and marginalised in research and practice, hence the relevance of this study. Drawing on the gender-aware 5M framework insights to understand how women entrepreneurs engage in the informal economy to help make sense of their realities. Also, consider the contribution of female entrepreneurs to the informal economy and how the government can formulate policies to support them.

Nigeria is an important context in which to study IFEs. According to ILO Nigeria (2014), Nigeria has the highest participation of women in the informal economy within Sub-Saharan African countries. However, there is little knowledge of the informal sector's contribution to the development of the Nigerian economy. One of the main reasons for the lack of research is the difficulty in collecting empirical data from these informal business activities. This research addresses this gap and presents the findings of the lived experiences of 20 IFEs in Nigeria. Our findings reveal that these female entrepreneurs navigate the challenges of informality by streamlining their product/service offerings to reduce waste and satisfy targeted customer needs. The research further uncovers challenges such as institutional voids, high inflation, competition, and limited business and digital skills. We further present the opportunities for business growth through innovativeness and resource pooling within their informal communities within their informal communities for business growth.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **5M Framework**

The 5M framework was developed by Brush et al. (2009) based on the pillars of the Bates et al. (2007) framework that reference markets, management (2009) based on the pillars from Bates et al. (2007) framework that reference markets, management and money as the primary factors required by entrepreneurs to be successful. Brush et al. (2009) further extend to incorporate further prevailing facets, namely: “motherhood” and the “meso” and “macro” environment. The uniqueness of the 5M framework is evident in its ability to explore the conceptual foundation of women's entrepreneurship and “for coherent research on women's entrepreneurship” (Marlow, Henry and Carter, 2009, p. 5). Most of this framework's research mainly focused on mainstream formal women entrepreneurship. For example, Abuhussein and Koburtay (2021) examined Jordan's women entrepreneurship and Caputo et al. (2016) investigated the influence of the macro/meso environment on women entrepreneurs in Jordan. Similarly, contextualising this framework to the Saudi Arabian context, Danish and Smith (2012) explored the challenges facing female entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia, while Welsh et al. (2014) uncovered the characteristics of Saudi women entrepreneurs, and Tlaiss (2014) highlighted the barriers faced by women entrepreneurs in the United Arab Emirates.

This framework has been used in the African context to analyse formal female entrepreneurship. Ahsan (2023) investigated female academic entrepreneurs in South Africa. Woldesenbet, Mwila, and Ogunmokun (2024) presented a systematic review using the 5M framework on African women's entrepreneurship. However, Xaba and Neneh (2022) adopted the 5M framework to analyse the South African IFE experience. IFEs in other countries have also been interrogated using the 5M framework. Ettl and Welter (2010) examined entrepreneurial learning and opportunity recognition in Germany. Berger and Kuckertz (2016) used the "5M" framework to explore the building blocks of female founders in the start-up ecosystem of 12 countries and the potential barriers these groups of entrepreneurs face. In Japan, Leung (2011) explores how "motherhood" plays a major role in the entrepreneurial journeys of women entrepreneurs. Despite the wide use of this feminist theoretical approach to understanding female entrepreneurship, very few studies have adopted this framework to study IFEs, showing the neglect of this marginalised group. Some of the few include a developmental paper by Cullen (2019) in which IFEs in Turkey were investigated and Xaba and Neneh's (2022) conference paper on South African IFEs. We, therefore, address this gap by contextualising this framework within an informal economy setting in Nigeria where similar work is missing.

For this research, we define the informal economy as the '*shadow, hidden, underground, black, unobserved economy or informal sector*' (Dell'Anno and Adu, 2020) as we contribute to the call for more coherent research and the contextual complexities of entrepreneurship. The five dimensions of the 5M framework, as presented in Figure 1, will be discussed next:

The '*Money*' dimension critiques the availability and access to finance by women. Men dominate asset ownership, household heads and paid employment (Igwe et al., 2018; Ng et al., 2022). Ajayi and Olotuah (2005) and (Onoshakpor et al., 2023a) suggest that women's rights to property and inheritance are restricted within the family context in Nigeria, which impacts their access to money for businesses seeing that property is the crucial criteria and asset to finance from commercial banks. This discourages women from formalising their business and would instead engage in the shadow economy. Putting this into the research context, 65% of Nigerian entrepreneurs are excluded from accessing finance from formal financial lending institutions. Most of this category of women are served by informal financial networks, such as friends, families, relatives, money lenders, microfinance institutions, cooperative associations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Umemezie and Ozifo, 2018). Of particular interest is the Microfinance institutions (MFIs) launched in 2005 to specifically address the finance gap by the unreached and underserved informal entrepreneurs, with Oke et

al. (2007) suggesting the MFIs serve more women than men. According to the IMF, microfinance institutions are designed for people who lack collateral. Despite the efforts of the MFIs, gender, informal economy, and poverty continue to co-exist to define the experiences of female entrepreneurs in Nigeria.

**‘Management’** is also a critical factor to a female entrepreneur as it alludes to human and organisational capital, which the framework’s authors categorise as comprising prior years of managerial experience and level of education. Woldie and Adesua (2004) suggest that female entrepreneurs in Nigeria run non-competitive businesses due to relatively low education and management skill levels, which limits access to resources for business growth. The patriarchal culture in Nigeria explains why this may be the case, as some cultures (Northern Nigeria) permit early marriages (14–16 years), thereby preventing them from accessing formal education, engaging in employment or starting a business. Generally, in sub-Saharan African countries, the culture tends to favour males' access to education over females (Onoshakpor et al., 2023a). This has led Nigerian women to build and operate businesses in the shadow/informal economy since a minimal level of education and work experience is required in that sector. On the other hand, the formal sector requires more formality to enter and engage in, making it difficult for IFEs to compete (Ukonu and Tafamel, 2011).

At the most fundamental level, **‘Market’**, the opportunity and foundation for any entrepreneurial activity, refers to the availability of and access to the business market when starting a new business venture. According to Garba (2011), accessibility to the market for female entrepreneurs in Nigeria is complicated based on gender and social expectations, which prefer home-based market opportunities, where females can combine entrepreneurial activities with domestic chores. For example, some Nigerian cultures frown against having women in the same public transport (taxi or bus) as men. At the same time, others frown at women who travel at night to conduct any form of business activity. These mobility challenges create access to market limitations that continue to make women risk-averse in running and operating businesses in the informal sector (Igwe et al., 2018). Due to women’s domestic roles coupled with the other restrictions mentioned above, women are forced to operate businesses from home and informally in the hidden economy. Igwe et al. (2018) and Medvedev and Oviedo (2009) opined that informal women’s business choices are not only because they want to evade taxes, as is in developed economies, but rather due to the costs and benefits of being informal.

According to the framework, the three elements above combine to create a sense of ***Motherhood***. This dimension is concerned with the role that the household context plays. The motherhood concept explains how family dynamics and context can create differences, enabling us to understand women's entrepreneurship (Jennings and McDougald, 2007). Family dynamics make female entrepreneurs' positioning within the informal economy oscillate between family, gender and other social expectations (Xheneti et al., 2019). Fapohunda (2012) confirms that the informal sector attracts more women due to family-induced constraints. Most of the informal businesses IFEs in Nigeria engage in include sales of recharge phone cards, hairdressing, perishable and non-perishable foods and fashion designing. These business activities are primarily based on services, trading, and agriculture (Ademokun and Ajayi, 2012).

The ***Macro and Meso environments*** uncover the support services, laws and economy that can often be regarded as gendered and how this impacts the operations of IFE. This is in addition to the notion that female entrepreneurs face restrictions caused by societal constructions, which combine to keep them within the informal economy as a 'no choice' option with no plans of formalisation (Dell'Anno and Adu, 2020). According to Onoshakpor et al. (2023), this environment treats women as minors and, therefore, subservient, even though the Nigerian constitution supports equal rights to men and women. Religious leaders further reinforced this through philosophies that support patriarchal thought systems as they cite the 'god-given' roles of women as mothers and wives, hence escalating the caring roles and obligations that extend to the wider society. A differentiation is made between the macro and meso environment; according to Abuhussein and Koburtay (2021), the macro-environment considers the socio-cultural and institutional arrangements and how women perceive and take advantage of business opportunities. The meso environment comprises occupational networks, business associations, and how this influences women's ability to access finance. Within the informal economy in Nigeria, women entrepreneurs have been restricted by the macro-environment. Ighomereho et al. (2013) posit that commercial banks and financial institutions in Nigeria have a negative attitude towards women as it is assumed they should access support from their husbands. However, they have been able to innovate within the meso environment that is seemingly under their control and not the government, as they embrace the concept of social capital (Olamide and Ogbechie, 2021). Social capital allows the use of the networks to access business opportunities and resources (Olamide and Ogbechie, 2021). Igwe et al. (2018) suggest women in many developing countries are most vulnerable and easily affected by these

environmental constraints. To break through this glass ceiling and barriers and operate a business means doing so as an informal activity.

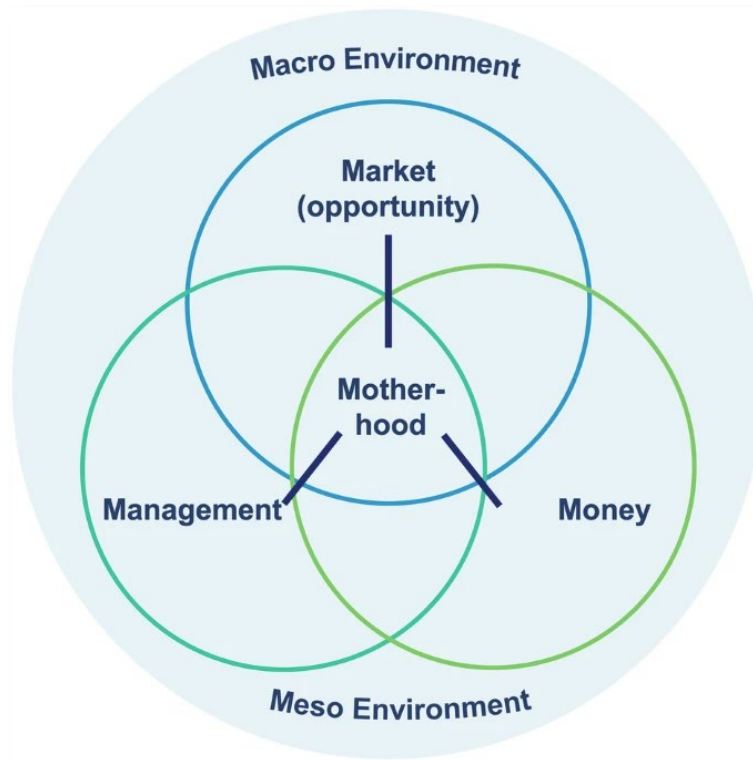


Figure 1: A gender-aware Framework for Female Entrepreneurship (Source: Brush et al., 2009)

## Research Methodology

### Research Context

This empirical study was conducted in Nigeria, a country in West Africa, with approximately 80% of informal economic activities and contributing to over 40% of its GDP in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The informal sector in Nigeria has been acknowledged as a critical contributor to the nation's economy. With the significant economic changes, including high cost of living, subsidy removal and a floating forex regime, the impact on informal sectors is even greater. Nigeria consists of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja and 36 autonomous states, and it has over 274 ethnic groups, languages and cultural heritages (Chinenye and Ogbera, 2013). Nigeria is divided into three major regions and grouped under six geopolitical zones. The geopolitical zones of Nigeria include South-East, South-South, South-West, North-Central, North-East, and North-West. This study's participants are fully represented in the six



geopolitical zones. SMEs have promoted Nigeria's economy by reducing poverty and unemployment. There has been a significant shift from capital-intensive industrial projects to small-scale businesses with the potential for sustainable industrial development (Agwu and Emeti, 2014; OCED, 2016b). Small businesses in Nigeria mainly engage in agricultural practices, wholesale and retail of finished goods, manufacturing of domestic products, food processing and support services (Gumel, 2017; Afolabi, 2013).

According to a survey conducted by PwC (2020), micro, small and medium enterprises account for 96% of all the businesses in Nigeria, contributing over 48% to Nigeria's GDP and providing over 84% of the employment. It is widely acknowledged that two-thirds of enterprises in developing countries are partly or wholly in the informal sector (Williams and Martinez-Perez, 2014; Autio and Fu, 2015). The informal sector in developing countries has a significant and growing presence of women. In Nigeria, the informal sector is vast and accounts for 65% of the economy, with up to 90% share of employment (Musara and Nieuwenhuizen, 2020) and a source of women's employment (Bonnet et al., 2019). According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Nigeria's informal sector increased by 8.5% between 2015 and 2017, accounting for 65% of GDP (Medina et al., 2017). Various factors impact the decision of an entrepreneur to operate informally, ranging from structural disadvantages such as gender and class to high regulatory barriers for formality (Klapper and Parker, 2011). Gender discrimination, among other factors, has led women to the informal sector for viable income-earning opportunities. Many Nigerian women engage in informal businesses, often out of necessity or to supplement household income. These businesses range from small-scale trade-based activities to household enterprises (Chant and Pedwell, 2008) and mostly self-financed, low-technology and labour-intensive operations (Klapper and Parker, 2011). The informal sector has been proven to meet the needs of female entrepreneurs as it enables flexibility in terms of working hours and proximity to business (Bahramitash and Salehi Esfahani, 2011). There has been limited research on the challenges faced by IFEs in Nigeria, as most of the studies are carried out in developed economies (Salvi et al., 2022), and Ogundala et al. (2021) acknowledge the lack of empirical research to understand women-owned businesses in the developing economies.

## **Research Sample**

Due to limited data on IFEs, purposive sampling was adopted to select participants. One of the authors knew some of the participants, and a further snowballing technique was adopted as initial participants signposting the researcher. A step method was adopted to recruit Nigerian IFEs, and we invited female entrepreneurs to complete an online questionnaire form voluntarily. Of the 49 participants who completed the form, 20 were selected as they were identified to operate informally and have been in business for at least 3 years. The researcher purposely selected participants from different geopolitical zones that could provide rich and relevant information on the research question (Patton, 2014). The criteria for selection include female entrepreneurs who are owners of micro and small businesses and have not complied with all the legal requirements associated with business practice.

All the research participants are married, educated women with a minimum of OND Diploma level and operating micro businesses with a maximum of 4 employees. The sector of operation includes food services (vendors, caterers, bakers), personal services (make-up artists, hairdressers, fashion designers) and roadside traders (perishable goods including foodstuffs, vegetables and fruits) across ages and degrees of experience as business owners. These female entrepreneurs' main motivations are mostly survival and financial support to the family. The participants operate independent and unregistered businesses; hence, they are non-formal taxable. Their informality does not include illicit/illegal business operations, according to the 17<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Labour Statistics (ICLS) as cited (OCED, 2019). Participants' demographics are presented in Table 1 based on anonymised names, age, educational level, years in business, business ventures, sources of finance and motivation for business.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Given the exploratory nature of the study, an interpretivist phenomenological approach was adopted to understand the challenges and opportunities of IFEs in Nigeria (Moser and Korstjens, 2018; Patton, 2014; Cope, 2005; 2011). Semi-structured interviews were conducted as this method is deemed appropriate to develop new insight and understanding through the why and how questions (Saunders et al., 2023) and a subjective lens. This study provides a rich and detailed explanation of the opportunities and challenges faced by IFEs. Semi-structured interviews allow the collection of open-ended data and the lived experiences of the participants (Busetto et al., 2020; Creswell, 2014). This method was adopted because it helps learning entrepreneurs in challenging contexts to reveal their experiences by establishing trust, rapport, rapport and commitment (Alvesson, 2013). A total of 20 semi-structured interviews

were conducted with IFEs willing to share their experiences, and each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. The interviews were conducted online via the Zoom platform, and informed consent was obtained from participants before conducting the interviews. The study aim was fully explained and communicated to participants before the scheduled time. Interview questions were open-ended, which enabled the researcher to gain rich and in-depth answers and probe for more information when required. Interviews were conducted in English, digitally recorded upon participants' consent and transcribed verbatim after the interviews to avoid loss of information.

Transcripts were coded manually, and the thematic analysis method of qualitative analysis was adopted for data analysis, which is particularly useful for examining situated processes and studying complex entities to provide detailed explanations (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The thematic analysis approach provides a better understanding of data and enables the development of categories and themes for result explanations (Bryman, 2016). We examine IFEs' challenges and how the opportunities available in developing countries influence informal women's business performance following Brush et al. (2009) 5M framework. The 5M framework is considered appropriate for thematic analysis of how participants access resources and institutional perspectives of gender and entrepreneurship of IFEs in Nigeria. Bryman's (2016) thematic analysis process was adopted, and interview data were transcribed verbatim immediately after the interviews. Each author read each transcript twice, and notes were taken based on the emerging themes. After data transcription and initial analysis, the researchers further informally reinterviewed 8 participants to enable collaboration with participants and an in-depth understanding of the emerging themes by clarifying issues, including inconsistencies, particularly emotive and highly descriptive narratives (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Also, the follow-up interviews generated additional information and clarity on the challenges faced by the participants. It further enhanced the data quality and checked the validity and reliability of the research findings. After the follow-up interviews, the next stage involved coding data into units based on the emerging themes. Codes were grouped into relevant categories, although many codes overlapped. The codes were subjected to a data reduction process (Creswell, 2014; Merriam and Grenier, 2019), and related data were categorised into new themes for explanation (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Table 2 illustrates the data coding process, data categorisation and supporting references.

Table 1: Research Participant's Demographics

	<b>Names</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Educational Level</b>	<b>Business Venture</b>	<b>Years in Business</b>	<b>Source of finance</b>	<b>Motivation for Business</b>
1	Eno	35 - 44	Diploma	Food Vendor	4	Family and friends	To support family
2	Ada	35 – 44	Masters	Veterinary services	8	Family support	Financial independence
3	Ufon	25 – 34	Degree	Sales of farm produce	6	Personal savings	To Support Family
4	Kate	35 –44	Degree	Agro-based and food processing	10	Personal savings	Financial Independence
5	Emem	25 – 34	Diploma	Caterer	4	Support from family	Business Opportunity
6	Ene	25 – 34	Diploma	Sales of foodstuff	4	Family support	Self-employment
7	Ima	25 – 34	Diploma	Sales of cleaning products	3	Personal savings	Business Opportunity
8	Uko	25 – 34	Diploma	Food vendor	3	Personal savings	No job
9	Uti	35 – 44	Diploma	Skin and Hair products	8	Personal savings and family	Passion, Financial Freedom
10	Chi	25 – 34	Degree	Telecommunications services s	5	Family support	Financial freedom
11	Mfon	35 –44	Degree	Food vendor	3	Personal saving	Side hustle
12	Esther	35 –44	Degree	Sales of groceries	7	Personal savings	Financial needs
13	Dora	35 –44	Degree	Sales of hair products	6	Personal savings	Financial growth
14	Seun	25 – 34	Diploma	Foodstuff vendor	3	Personal savings	Financial support
15	Anam	25 – 34	Diploma	Seafood vendor	4	Personal savings	To support family
16	Emma	35 – 44	Diploma	Poultry farming	10	Family and friends	Passion, Financial Freedom
17	Maya	35 –44	Degree	Entertainment	9	Family	Family support
18	Eka	45 – 54	Diploma	Sales of bags and shoes	18	Family	Financial independence
19	Ofon	25 – 34	Degree	Food Vendor	5	Family	Financial independence
20	Franca	25 – 34	Degree	Event planning and catering	8	Family and friends	Financial Independence

**Source:** created by the authors

Table 2: Data Categories, Subthemes, Sample quotes and Supportive references

5M (Category)	Challenges (Subthemes)	Sample Quotes	Opportunities (Subthemes)	Sample Quotes	Supporting References
Money (financial capital)	<b>Access to Financial Capital</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Start-up cost</li> <li>- High cost of production and operation</li> </ul>	<p><i>“Could never get a loan from the bank. No one will even listen to you” (Ufon)</i></p> <p><i>“The increase in the prices of goods and services is alarming, making the cost of production high” (Kate)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Finances mostly from family and friends</li> <li>- Personal savings</li> </ul>	<p><i>“My mother financed my business at the start” (Emem)</i></p> <p><i>“My finances came from friends and family, and I paid back once I started making a profit” (Ofon)</i></p>	Carter and Shaw, 2006; Derera et al., 2014.
Market (opportunity)	<b>Access to the market</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited market reach and market uncertainty</li> <li>- High cost of local competition</li> <li>- Social and cultural barriers</li> </ul>	<p><i>“The level of uncertainty is alarming, from the high cost of purchasing raw materials to raw materials scarcity” (Kate).</i></p> <p><i>“So many food vendors are struggling to sell” (Ofon).</i></p> <p><i>“There are some functions I cannot attend as a married woman and as such not able to provide my services there” (Maya).</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social network</li> <li>- Word of mouth/mouse</li> <li>- Customer Reviews/ Recommendations</li> <li>- Adoption of social media and digital technologies</li> <li>- Formalising some aspects of the business.</li> </ul>	<p><i>“Most of my customers are friends and family”. (Ima)</i></p> <p><i>“With social media, I now have a close network of customers, and product reviews are beneficial”. (Franca)</i></p> <p><i>“My customers also recommend my services to others in their networks” (Eno)</i></p>	Gupta et al., 2014; Dy et al., 2017;
Management	<b>Technical and Managerial Challenges</b>	<p><i>“Limited business skills hindered the growth of my business initially. I had to</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Entrepreneurial skills development</li> </ul>	<p><i>“Most of the skills required for my business I paid for the training” (Ada)</i></p>	

(human and organisational capital)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited technical and business skills</li> <li>- Unskilled staff and Staff retention</li> </ul>	<p><i>learn bookkeeping, customer relationships, etc “(Ene).</i></p> <p><i>“Due to limited knowledge by my staff, I have to be present at all events to oversee everything” (Franca).</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Access to network resources online/offline</li> <li>- Network structures.</li> <li>- Previous work experience/Education</li> </ul>	<p><i>“Connecting with other women to share knowledge and experience” (Eka)</i></p>	
Motherhood (family context)	<p><b>Impacts of Motherhood</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Work-life balance.</li> <li>- Gender constraints and Multiple identities</li> </ul>	<p><i>“It took a lot to explain to my husband why I needed to start a business”. (Ufon)</i></p> <p><i>“Most times you have to deal with being a wife, mother, sister, and a businesswoman” (Chi)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good planning and time management</li> <li>- Believing in self and working harder</li> <li>- Support from family/network</li> </ul>	<p><i>“I had to sit down and think how to balance work and family responsibility” (Uko)</i></p> <p><i>“I have to show up every day at my business, and this helps me to be a stronger person” (Ene)</i></p>	Carter and Ram, 2003; Aldrich and Cliff, 2003; Hatoum et al., 2023; Mayes et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2022;
Macro/Meso Environment (economy, laws, culture, support services)	<p><b>Micro/Meso - Environment Influences</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Formal Institutional voids</li> <li>- Limited infrastructures</li> <li>- Socio-cultural barriers</li> <li>- Limited sector of operations</li> </ul>	<p><i>“It is challenging to get employment that recognises your role as a mother”. (Ofon)</i></p> <p><i>“The high level of corruption, and we are not even sure of the regulations”. (Emma)</i></p> <p><i>“There are no set rules of operations or processes” (Maya)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Business network</li> <li>- Social networks</li> <li>- Support Services</li> </ul>	<p><i>“At the beginning of the years, few female businesses were selected, and I was one of them to enjoy the free training that lasted two months” (Ada).</i></p> <p><i>“I work with others in my business sector when executing large contracts”. (Maya)</i></p>	Brush et al., 2009; Jennings and Brush, 2013 Su et al., 2017 Gupta et al., 2014

**Source:** created by the authors

## Findings

All the research participants were business owners and well educated with a minimum of a Diploma, and 12 had previous knowledge working in different organisations based on their education. The participants' businesses were all located near their homes, had low entry financial requirements, and mainly operated on micro or small scales. The reason for starting up the business was primarily due to lack of employment, passion, financial support for the family, economic independence, creating employment opportunities, side hustle and most importantly, flexibility to accommodate work-life balance and family responsibilities. The study's key findings will be presented by adopting the 5M framework to discuss the peculiar challenges and opportunities associated with being a female and operating as an informal entrepreneur in Nigeria.

### Access to Financial Capital

All the participants experienced various financial difficulties; they had to settle for micro-scale operations due to limited access to funds. The following are the subthemes identified with financial problems: start-up cost and high cost of production. **Start-Up Cost:** All the participants experienced limited start-up funds, which is also why they operate informally. Most of the participants started business as a side hustle and built on informal access to financial resources before they were able to launch. In Nigeria, female entrepreneurs are often seen as high-risk and financial institutions limit their willingness to provide loans and financial support. Microfinance institutions accessible to female entrepreneurs usually come with high interest rates. Due to informal operations outside the formal regulatory framework, they face unique financial challenges regarding start-up and financial management. Research participants lack the documentation for bank loans and credits, forcing them to depend mainly on personal savings and informal lending, which are high-cost and unreliable. The high cost of start-up also limits the business scale. Kate explained how she had to build business finances over two years to save up to start her business. *"Gathering seed money delayed my business. I had to wait over two years to start as I had to save up"* (Kate). With Nigeria's high cost of living crisis, it is challenging for participants to access start-up funds with savings. Emem had to start her business through an informal credit facility whereby she bought ingredients on credit to start her catering business and only paid once she could make sales. That is how she began by reinvesting little profits. *"I didn't have any start-up money or start-*

*up capital, so I had to go to the women selling ingredients to collect them on credit. Use the ingredients to prepare the food, sell to customers and then pay off my debts” (Emem).*

Due to a lack of collateral, limited documentation and informal business operations, participants could not access formal bank loans. Ufon expressed her frustration that no formal bank could meet her financial needs as a start-up business. *“Could never get a loan from the bank; none will even listen to me” (Ufon).* The absence of formal business planning, financial illiteracy and limited business skills also limits access to formal business finance. Ada, who provides veterinary services, explained the high cost of operation, including the acquisition of infrastructure and supplies of raw materials. *“At the start of business, I had to buy a few machinery and products, funded by my husband” (Ada).* Findings indicated that participants depended on informal financial sources, including personal savings, friends and family.

***High cost of production and operation:*** The sudden increase in the prices of raw materials due to inflation rates, exchange rates, and general economic conditions influences purchasing power and pricing strategies. Also, infrastructure deficiencies, which led to higher transportation costs and limited access to water and electricity, impacted the participant’s daily business operations. Kate operates Agro-based and food processing services and expressed frustration with Nigeria’s lack of price control. On further probing, she explained how prices change daily, and the challenges faced in product distribution due to inefficient logistics networks. *“The increase in the prices of goods and services is alarming, making production and operation costs very high” (Kate).* Due to a lack of funds and bulk purchases, participants are involved in smaller and more frequent purchases, leading to additional costs, including handling and transportation, and paying higher for goods and raw materials.

Support from family and friends, personal savings, and reinvesting profits in the business are the only options for participants. Emem stated how her mum lent her the start-up fund. *“My mother financed my business at the start” (Emem).* Similarly, Ofon got a soft loan from family and friends. *“My finances came from friends and family, and I paid back once I started making a profit” (Ofon).* Unlike the developed economy, where the government supports business start-ups, that is not the case in Nigeria. Participants experienced various financial limitations when starting and operating the business. Operating informally also leads to higher costs, including being forced to pay a wide range of indirect taxes, user fees and informal taxes, bribes and fines by community leaders. A seafood vendor, Anam, stated that some non-uniformed men usually come into the shop demanding informal payments, including operation dues. *“In*



*this community, every day you see different groups of people coming to demand operation fees, taxes, etc. We do not even know the government officials” (Anam).* Local touts and gangs oppress participants by demanding unofficial fees to secure business operations and market spaces. Esther also confirms this, *“All manner of people come here every time demanding levies, and we have to pay so we can sell our goods” (Esther).*

### **Access to Market**

Accessing the market was identified as a considerable challenge. Participants expressed fear of the uncertain market due to constant increases in the price of goods and services. Various factors contributed to these challenges, including the ability to reach customers, expansion of businesses and profitability. The following subthemes were identified as the significant challenges participants faced accessing new and existing markets: Limited market reach, high local competition, and social and cultural barriers.

**Limited Market Reach and Uncertainty:** Due to operating informally, access to wider markets is limited. Uti, who produces local skin and hair products, stated that she is limited to the local market as she does not have the legal requirements to operate and is afraid that competitors could steal her ideas. *“I am afraid to advertise my products on social media. I only sell locally to people” (Uti).* Some participants fear introducing their products and services into new markets due to fear of competition or new rivals. *“Telling people about my business at some point was a huge concern. I did not want them to steal my ideas” (Uti).* Due to fear of informal operations, participants have limited themselves to local markets and are not confident about advertising to broader markets. The uncertain market terrain was also identified as a challenge, and Kate explained how the cost of production and raw material scarcity limit production. *“The level of uncertainty is alarming, from the high cost of purchasing raw materials to raw materials scarcity” (Kate).*

**High Local Competition:** There are high local competition as most informal businesses do not have a competitive advantage, and the cost of new entry is very low. Franca stated that everyone now is opening an event planning and catering business, and market share is limited. *“Event planners and caterers are all over that place. I need to constantly improve and provide a specialised service to stay in the market” (Franca).* The market is saturated with vendors offering the same or similar products. Similarly, Ofon confirms, *“So many food vendors, we are struggling to sell” (Ofon).* Access to new customers is limited as different vendors offer the same services and products. *“Getting new customers can be a huge challenge” (Chi).*

Family, friends and social networks are the main customers of the participants. They confirmed that well-established networks sustain their businesses. Eno stated, *“Most of my customers are friends and family” (Ima)*. *“I sell to the people of this community; they all know me” (Eno)*. Word of mouth and referrals enhanced visibility within reachable markets. Also, according to Ada, *“My family and friends are never tired of my services, and they also tell others” (Ada)*.

***Social and Cultural Barriers:*** Participants experienced limited business operations due to socio-cultural barriers. Female entrepreneurs often have the primary responsibility of domestic and household chores. Seun operates in her local community, which is close to her family, where she can care for her family while operating a business. *“I can only operate in this location. I, it is close to home and family, you won’t want to operate your business outside your location, how will people see you” (Seun)*. They are also restricted by cultural norms where females' mobility should be within their local community and particular functions. Maya explained why she could not perform some tasks and events as a married woman. *There are some functions I cannot attend as a married woman and cannot provide my services there (Maya)*.

Limited access to business networks also hindered participants' ability to expand market reach. However, some market limitations were addressed by adopting social media and digital resources. The adoption of social media platforms has granted access to new markets, and participants now engage with customers and others on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook paid ads to market and advertise beyond their local communities. Ene stated that she sells goods online and offers delivery services nationwide. *“Since I started advertising online, I now sell to anyone everywhere in Nigeria. So many people now see my products and can order online and pay for delivery, and I will post the goods to them” (Ene)*. Franca explained that social media lets customers write reviews about her services. Participants can also access product and service recommendations from existing customers online, enabling new customers to place orders. *“With social media, I have increased my customer base, and product reviews and recommendations are very useful” (Franca)*.

Similarly, Eno confirms access to wider networks through customer recommendations. *“My customers also recommend my services to others in their networks” (Eno)*. Formalising some aspects of the business also allowed participants access to formal markets. Ada, who provides veterinary services, explained how she now provides services across different geographical locations and has increased her client base since she acquired some of the required operation

licenses. *“Since I got my license, customers believe I have the expertise of operation, and I have experienced recommendations and even provide services outside my local community”* (Ada). Participants relied on social networks, including previous work colleagues, family and friends, to access markets and improve business productivity.

### **Technical and Managerial Challenges**

Managerial skills and training are vital for participants to succeed in their entrepreneurial activities. Research participants have different business motivations and aspirations. The following subthemes were identified as the most challenging management issues experienced by the participants: limited technical and business skills, poor time management skills, unskilled staff and staff retainment.

**Limited Technical and Business Skills:** Research participants lack essential business management skills, including marketing, strategic planning, and inventory management. According to Ene, limited business operational skills impact business growth. *“Limited business skills hindered the growth of my business initially. I had to learn bookkeeping, customer relationships, etc”* (Ene). Although all the participants were educated, education did not ensure entrepreneurial skills. However, education enables women to acquire further business knowledge and skills. Maya stated that women struggled to undergo the required training due to ill-suited timings, high cost and limited resources. *“It took me a longer time to acquire the required skills for my business, such as effective use of sound systems and mixing songs, and I had to use the profit from my business to pay for the training”* (Maya). Most participants continue to operate manually, which is time-consuming and reduces productivity and scalability. As stated by Ima, *“Our production is done manually. I need to be trained on how to use the machines”* (Ima). Limited technical and business skills impact our participant's level of innovation and efficient business operations.

**Unskilled Staff and Staff Retainment:** Managing and retaining good employees was identified as a challenge. Due to the informality and size of the business, it is difficult for IFEs to recruit experts and retain good talent. As stated by Dora, who owns a beauty salon, it is challenging to employ an expert, and most times, participants cannot afford to hire experts due to financial limitations. They also struggle between training new staff members and retaining old ones. *“It is not easy to have a hairdresser work for you for up to one year. They are always leaving to the bigger salons for higher pay, we are constantly recruiting, and it is good for the business”* (Dora). Franca also expressed her frustration with employees who are not competent in

delivering services. *“Due to limited knowledge by my staff, I have to be present at all events to oversee everything” (Franca).* Some participants faced discrimination against their employees, especially the male ones. Ada stated, *“Some male employees will argue with the instructions because they think they know more than you” (Ada).* However, they developed coping strategies for managing businesses and remaining profitable. According to Kate, she had to learn the required skills to operate and manage her business effectively. *“I invested in the required skill set to manage my business. I also attended a business school before I launched my business” (Kate).* One of our participants, Ima, stated how she engaged with online resources such as YouTube videos and other resources to learn and improve her business offerings. *“I learned different methods to improve my cleaning business using online training” (Ima).* Formal education was instrumental, as participants had the required education and could easily acquire the necessary skills for specific businesses. Ada, a trained Vet from the university, attended business training on how to manage business operations. *“Most of the skills required for my business I paid for the training; I attended a business school so I can manage my business effectively, although I am a professional Vet doctor” (Ada).* Previous work experience was also valuable in managing business. Access to network resources such as following other female entrepreneurs on social media platforms and free business literature online also enabled participants to improve business processes. As stated by Chi, the skills acquired during work experience were transferred to business. *“I worked in the oil and gas for 5 years before starting my business, so I have an idea of business models and structure” (Chi).* Similarly, Ene acquired basic business skills from her mother. *“My mother used to sell foodstuff, so I learned from her” (Ene).* Eka can access essential business resources such as customer relations and other business skills by networking with other women. *“Connecting with other women online to share knowledge and experience also helps improve how I manage my business” (Eka).*

### **Impacts of Motherhood**

All the participants were married women with at least one child, and they all had family responsibilities and roles, including financial and domestic, which negatively impacted entrepreneurial activities, resulting in spending longer hours in business. The motherhood construct represents family context concerning the household unit and extended family (Brush et al., 2009). Social and family roles attributed to motherhood contend with entrepreneurial roles. According to Foley et al. (2018), entrepreneurship provides a balance between family

commitment and business, and motherhood can be a resource to drive entrepreneurship. Gender roles shape participants' entrepreneurial choices, and the nature of businesses is factored into their lifestyle and is based on necessity. The following subthemes were identified as challenges based on the motherhood element: work-life balance, gender constraints and multiple identities.

**Work-life Balance:** Participants stated that motherhood was a significant factor when considering entrepreneurship, noting that starting a business allows flexibility and family time. Ima, previously working at the state education, had to stop due to family responsibilities, including childcare. *“It was difficult balancing family and work when I was doing 8 – 5. I had to stop work and start up a business that will allow me to take care of my young children while making some income” (Ima).* Participants struggled to balance business activities and family responsibilities, especially those with younger children and limited support. Seun explained how she goes everywhere with the children and stays at the shop. *After school, my children come to the shop and stay with me till I close by 7 pm. We will then go home as I do not have any childminder (Seun).* Gender and family roles shaped the choices of entrepreneurial activities, business sector and location.

**Gender Constraints and Multiple Identities:** Although family has been a support system for most participants, others struggled to balance family responsibilities and demands. Chi explains how she struggles to balance multiple responsibilities. *“Most times, I have dealt with being a wife, mother, sister, and businesswoman. My husband thinks I am making so much profit with the business and will refuse to pay the children's fees and clothes” (Chi).* She further stated the emotional and mental stress associated with entrepreneurship, especially with limited support from immediate family and when burdened with family financial responsibilities, which affects the business funds. Ufon also expressed how the husband was firmly against her starting a business, mainly because of patriarchal cultural norms where a woman is seen as insubordinate when she is financially independent. *“It took a lot to explain to my husband why I needed to start a business and that I will always be submissive to him” (Ufon).* This demonstrates how frustrated female entrepreneurs are dealing with their roles as mothers and entrepreneurs. In line with the study by Lewis et al. (2022) and Mayes et al. (2020), female entrepreneurs are negatively impacted by the tension of being mothers and entrepreneurs based on normative expectations.

Findings demonstrate that the participants have a strong sense of responsibility and willingness to learn and improve their business practices. Due to financial and family commitments, acquiring knowledge and skills to overcome obstacles and remain in business is required. Uko stated how she had to take the pains to develop herself and gain the skills to balance business and family responsibilities. *“I had to sit down and learn how to balance work and family responsibilities; I have my diary with me all the time, planning for my business and family” (Uko)*. Some participants explained how being an entrepreneur enabled them to stay positive and productive, making ends meet and fulfilling financial needs. *“I have to show up daily at my business, which helps me to be stronger” (Ene)*. Although family and motherhood contended with entrepreneurial activities, the family was also identified as a support system for these women. Eka explained how her husband markets her products and provides financial support. *“My husband is very supportive, especially financially; he also tells his friends and colleagues about my products” (Eka)*.

Similarly, Emma also stated how her children support the day-to-day running of her business. *“My children volunteer on the farm to feed the birds and with cleaning, and I reward them occasionally.” (Emma)*. Support from family and friends includes financial resources, shared knowledge, experience, and emotional support. All the participants belonged to at least two forms of networks. Connecting with other mothers in business also enabled participants to stay encouraged by sharing business and family experiences, knowledge and development. Esther explained, *“Relating with other mothers in business has helped my mental health. Knowing other women face challenges and succeed keeps me motivated (Esther)*.

### **Macro and Meso - Environment Influences**

Participants were asked about the impact of traditional and societal influences on their entrepreneurial practices. Findings show that all aspects of IFEs are influenced by customary barriers that impact women's entrepreneurship negatively. This section demonstrates how the impact of macro and meso-environmental factors limit women's motivations and preferences to informal and necessity-driven entrepreneurship. Macro structures frame gender roles and responsibilities within societies. The macro factors were identified as another significant challenge participants face and partly why they operate informally. Macro environment factors include national policies, socio-cultural factors, laws and Nigeria's economy. The culture influences how women entrepreneurs view their businesses, perceive opportunities, and make strategic business decisions. Participants faced complex and discriminatory regulations

ranging from the lack of formal laws regarding business registrations, regulations and operation laws to the lack of social amenities and infrastructures, including access roads, power supply, internet service and limited sectors of operations. These limited infrastructures hinder business practices. According to Maya, in the entertainment industry, she stated that: *“There are no set rules of operations or practice”* (Maya). The level of corruption in Nigeria also impacted business operations and led to trust issues. *“There is a high level of corruption in this country, and we are not even sure of the regulations”* (Emma). Socio-cultural barriers, including societal perceptions and attitudes, also impact IFEs, influencing access to resources, business practices and confidence. They are mostly seen as weak when their businesses are failing and “wayward”, selling themselves (sexually) for businesses if they succeed. Anam explained how she is usually labelled wayward since she is progressing in business. *“Most men and family members think I am selling myself for business success”* (Anam). The participants also experienced the negative impacts of the Nigerian patriarchal system and gender-related discrimination.

The Meso environment includes supporting services available to IFEs, such as business partnerships, social capital from other women in businesses, and informal networks created for financial purposes. A few non-governmental bodies are supporting female entrepreneurs in Nigeria. Support services accessed by the participants include free business training and collaboration with other female entrepreneurs. *“At the beginning of the years, few female businesses were selected, and I was one of them to enjoy the free training that lasted two months”* (Ada). Participants were also involved in informal financial saving groups, commonly known as *Osusu*, which enabled them to pool financial resources to facilitate business investments. *“The money from my savings with other women in business has helped to expand and sustain my business”* (Dora). Social networks, including friends and previous colleagues, promoted business operations and market access. *“We usually support each other with school runs, especially when there is a need for either of us to attend to business”* (Mfon). *Due to limited resources and knowledge, some participants collaborate with others. “I work with others in my business sector when executing large contracts”.* (Maya)

## **Discussion**

This study identifies the opportunities available to IFEs in Nigeria, their challenges and how they develop coping strategies to sustain businesses. It discusses female entrepreneurship as a gendered phenomenon and how limited resources and institutional underpinnings shape female

enterprising. The adoption of the 5M framework provided the structure that guided the thematic analysis and discussion of the findings of the processes of IFEs in Nigeria. The findings demonstrate how IFEs utilised the resources available through social networks, family, previous job experiences and social media to improve business practices and performance. Although prior research has investigated women entrepreneurs in Africa (Woldesenbet Beta et al., 2024; Ahsan, 2023; Ojediran and Anderson, 2020) using the 5M framework, this study proceeds to address the informal sector of female entrepreneurs in Nigeria and its peculiarities. The informal sector is a significant source of employment for women in developing economies (Bonnet et al., 2019; Olu-Owolabi et al., 2020). However, their informal business practices are influenced mainly by the following challenges: limited start-up funds, limited formal employment opportunities, traditional and gender roles based on cultural and social factors that restrict participation in formal employment, pushing them towards informal entrepreneurship where they can balance work and family responsibilities and the need to provide financial support to families (Ademokun and Ajayi, 2012). Challenges faced by participants due to operating informally include lack of access to credit facilities, declining order volumes due to inflation and macroeconomic downturns, lack of formal contracts and customer base and being overlooked by the policymakers (Madichie et al., 2021), harassment and demands for bribes by touts, lack the resources to expand into new markets, satisfy existing customers, experience limited mobility and limited innovation.

Previous studies have established that women entrepreneurs experience more financial constraints than male entrepreneurs (Freel et al., 2012; Saviano et al., 2017; Mezgebo et al., 2017). Financial challenges due to limited access to formal loans from commercial banks (Ajayi and Olotuah, 2005) force IFEs to settle for businesses that require low start-up costs, such as retailing and the service sector. Previous studies also identified access to funds as a significant challenge for female entrepreneurs in developed countries (Carter and Shaw, 2006; Carter et al., 2015). However, in developing countries and with the impact of informal practices, female entrepreneurs are less likely to access formal credits based on the inability to prove financial credibility due to a lack of collateral and assets (Aterido et al., 2013; Onoshakpor et al., 2023b). Internal financial sources such as personal savings and soft loans from family and friends are the sources of business capital (Rouse and Jayawarna, 2006; Derera et al., 2014). Although financial support from microfinance is targeted towards female entrepreneurs, they primarily access these funds for business survival and not for expansion (Ukanwa et al., 2018), and most IFEs cannot have access to microfinance funds.



Limited market access was also identified as one of the challenges. Due to the informal nature of businesses and limited financial capital, IFEs are unable to mobilise and market products and services effectively (Igwe et al., 2018; Woldesenbet Beta et al., 2022), and they fear being in the public as they are unprepared to face competition. IFEs depend on family and informal networks as major customer bases (Kwami, 2015; James, 2021). Relational orientation was adopted, which includes relational contracts and payments (Uzuegbunam and Uzuegbunam, 2018), offline and online word of mouth and building relationship strategies and adoption of digital resources and social media platforms (Dy et al., 2017; Olamide and Ogbechie, 2021) facilitate entrance to new markets (Hodges et al., 2015; Sowatey et al., 2018). IFEs experienced various managerial challenges that negatively impacted business productivity and efficiency. Human capital and effective recruitment were also challenging as IFEs do not always have the required skills (Fiala, 2018; Zolin et al., 2013). A strong link exists between education and managerial skills as IFEs with higher education and business knowledge evidence cognitive skills to promote business performance and are opportunity-driven (Aterido and Hallward-Driemeier, 2011; Eijdenberg van Montfort, 2017). Social network resources were adopted through peer learning and sharing experiences to acquire managerial skills, including problem-solving and decision-making capabilities (Olamide and Ogbechie, 2021).

Motherhood is the core of female entrepreneurs, reflecting the role of household and family context in entrepreneurship (Brush et al., 2009; Leung, 2011). The crucial role, position and influence of motherhood on female entrepreneurs include family responsibilities, societal expectations (Fisher et al., 2017; Jennings and McDougald, 2007) and the complexity of household dynamics. IFEs struggle to balance work and family responsibilities and adjust business practices to suit family responsibilities (Gudeta and van Engen, 2018). Although social networks and family are major support systems for female entrepreneurs (Powell and Eddleston, 2013), some do not receive family support, and family responsibilities negatively affect their entrepreneurial practices (Ukanwa et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2022). Societal perceptions and gender roles contradict IFE's entrepreneurial roles (Hundera et al., 2019; Mezgebo et al., 2017; Hatoum et al., 2023). Gendered roles influence the choices of entrepreneurial activities and practices (Adom and Anambane, 2019).

In Nigeria, although the informal sector accounts for over 65% of the economy with up to 90% share of employment (Musara and Nieuwenhuizen 2020), the lack of or limited formal institutions and policies (Sydow et al., 2022) influences IFEs decision making and performance. Cultural and social norms frame how IFEs perceive opportunities and view

business practices (Brush et al., 2009), and these factors influence access to money, market and managerial skills. Gender stereotypes and societal expectations of female entrepreneurs' impact business activities as they influence opportunity evaluation and identification (Gupta et al., 2014; Greene et al., 2013). IFEs lived experiences highlight that most challenges faced are gender-specific, societal expectations, balancing family and business responsibilities, limited credit options, market challenges, inadequate infrastructures, security concerns and regulatory and legal constraints (Abuhussein and Koburtay, 2021). Participants leverage network relationships and digital technology to improve their visibility, profitability and sustainable enterprises. These IFEs have shown resilience and innovativeness in coping with and overcoming some of these challenges to achieve economic independence and financially support their families (Ojong and Dana, 2021; Rezaei-Moghaddam and Fatemi, 2023). This study demonstrates the different coping strategies IFEs in Nigeria adopted in overcoming the intersecting challenges of gender, patriarchy and informality by adopting digital resources such as social media, accessing network resources, and acquiring business knowledge and skills to improve overall business performance. It further extends the 5M framework to provide new insights in the context of IFEs in Nigeria with the high percentages of women operating in the informal sector and illustrates the peculiarity of this unique sector.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

This study contributes twofold: theoretically, we explore the lived experiences and examine the complex nature of IFEs in Nigeria to provide an in-depth understanding of this peculiar sector's practices and challenges. We also offer an account of how they responded to these challenges through explanations and accounts of effective practices to access social resources to overcome resource limitations and institutional constraints. Adopting Brush et al.'s (2009) framework, our findings highlight the uniqueness of IFEs in Nigeria, presenting new insights. We respond to the need for empirical studies that provide a better understanding of the uniqueness of informal female entrepreneurs in developing and disadvantaged economies. Also, we demonstrate the influence of resource constraints, family context, and institutional environments (Woldesenbet Beta et al., 2024) on the experiences of IFEs in developing countries (Ogundana et al., 2021). We provide an in-depth discussion of informal female entrepreneurs in Nigeria and highlight the challenging factors and available opportunities for sustainable business growth. This study further advances the contextual embeddedness of IFEs

in a unique context where patriarchal structures remain strong. It contributes to the literature on IFEs by empirically identifying and examining the intersection of gender, informality and patriarchy to further understand the complex nature of informal female entrepreneurship in Nigeria using the 5M framework.

We contribute to management practices that support policymakers in Nigeria, IFE owner managers and institutions. Policymakers in Nigeria should consider empowering IFEs by providing clear regulations, simplifying the processes for business registration, improving access to finance and enhancing infrastructures. Specifically, the government should provide government-backed low-interest loans targeted toward IFEs and training to enable IFEs to manage business finances effectively. There should be policies to address the patriarchal practices against women to reduce gender bias and promote financial literacy and gender equality. We encourage the government to collaborate with institutions and organisations to provide entrepreneurship training that facilitates e-commerce and digital inclusions. We recommend IFE owner-manager's openness to learning new approaches that improve business practices and engage in social and business networks. Also, women entrepreneurs who are successful in business can become role models for new start-ups, inspiring and supporting them in accessing finances and other business resources.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Although this study provides considerable insight into the understanding of the informal female entrepreneurs in Nigeria, limitations of this study are acknowledged, including interpreting the findings and the small number of participants, which limits the generalisation of the results. Other research is required to explore the challenges and opportunities in other sub-Saharan African countries and compare them with the present findings. Secondly, to address interpretation bias, quantitative research which applies statistical analysis would validate the present findings. This research highlights the need to research female entrepreneurship in the context of developing economies so that policymakers can provide targeted and effective support services to informal female entrepreneurs. In the subsequent studies, we will consider a longitudinal approach to capture changes over time and long-term business outcomes.

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